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# GOD'S PROVIDENCE HOUSE.

A Story of 1791.

BY MRS. G. LINNÆUS BANKS.



IN THREE VOLUMES. VOL. I.

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## P R E F A C E.

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FROM a good old aunt by whose side the Authoress passed from infancy to maturity, she obtained the thread of narrative on which she has strung her own fiction, and some incidental "facts."

There may be elderly people yet living in Chester, who can remember hearing in their distant childhood of the discoveries made at a long-deserted and "haunted" Grange, near the River Dee, by a fearless love-making servant man, employed by the equally daring farmer who had ventured on the tenancy of house and lands. It is not desirable to forestall her story in the Preface, else would the writer give the line of demarcation between fact and fiction.

How near to the mouth of the river the veritable Grange was situated is unknown to the novelist, who has located the mansion at Shotwick simply for the

purposes of her story. She has made use of God's Providence House as she might of any other historic place; and if she has accepted from tradition for the house a tenant, who, in following his daily occupations, grew rapidly rich in the mode described, she can safely say that in all other respects Mr. Peover is her own creation.

The scene on Gallows Hill is authentic; so is that of the snow-drift in Delamere Forest. The same may be said of other incidents introduced, not for the sake of "sensation," but to show the general state of the country, the roads, customs, habits, and condition of the people at the close of the last century. A veteran living artist remembers seeing at Bagnigge Wells, highwaymen enter the tavern and lay down their horse-pistols on the table before them, as coolly as the modern traveller would put down satchel or gloves, and the mother of the Authoress knew a woman who caused her own husband to be kidnapped.

Therefore she hopes she has not exceeded nature or probability in her picture, either by exaggerated drawing or overcolouring; whatever other errors of judgment she may unconsciously have committed.

In the belief that the English language is suffi-

ciently ample to subserve all the ordinary purposes of life, in this story of homely English people, addressed to English readers, she has striven (and she trusts not in vain) to steer clear alike of bad French and still more objectionable slang.

Grenville Grange gave its name to the story originally; but, acting on the advice of older and more experienced heads than her own, the Authoress changed the title at the last moment to that which it now bears, and which they considered more satisfactory and appropriate.

LONDON,

*June 30, 1865.*



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# GOD'S PROVIDENCE HOUSE.

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## CHAPTER I.

### THE TWO TENANTS.

WHEN Michael Ford became the owner of Grenville Grange, in right of Margaret his wife (the last of the Grenvilles), it was as wild and desolate a spot as ever schoolboy shuddered to pass. Twenty winters had been tearing at it with ruthless hands, hurling down chimney-stacks, displacing coping-stones, beating in window-panes, rusting the hinges and dragging the shutters down, to creak and flap in the wind, crumbling to touchwood the unused bridge over the moat, and battering the stone griffins—those grim sentinels of a gateway they could not guard. The gate had long been burst from its fastenings, and stood invitingly open, suspended from one hinge, as if tottering to its fall.

But twenty summers, with compassionate touch and dainty fingers, had striven to bind up the wounds

inflicted by winter's weapons, had clasped the walls with ivy wreaths, and hung its glossy banners over dilapidated chimney and cornice, over rents and breaches; draped its dark leaves above the upper windows in graceful festoons, to guard the interior from blasts which wooed too roughly; had mingled in loving embrace with the friendly ivy the tendrils of woodbine and clematis to cluster round the deserted porch, and peep into the bay-windows of the lower rooms; had thrown a mantle of green over the stagnant waters of the moat; strewn and grown a bed of leaves and weeds to support the drooping gate; coated the griffins with robes of velvety moss, imparted to the once quaintly-cut yews and laurels the fresh beauty of natural growth, and hid the festering heaps of withered leaves beneath a wealth of roses and flowers of rainbow hues.

But all to little purpose. Winter had been stronger than summer; the vegetation was rank even in its luxuriance; the broken panes and rotting wood spoke of neglect and decay; the grass-grown paths, tangled and matted with weeds, proclaimed neglect, and worse—avoidance. The fruit might grow and ripen on the trees, and fall untouched, though the gates were open and village urchins within half a mile: so the place was ghastly even in the sunshine; and in the autumn, when Michael came to survey his new possessions, it was dreary-looking indeed.

He was not, however, a man of strong imagination, had no romantic tendencies, was not infected with superstitious fears ; so he measured the acres and counted the rooms with as much composure as though the last tenant had just quitted, and no ghostly inhabitant ever had, or could have, a lease of the premises.

A foolhardy man was Michael Ford in the opinion of the neighbouring farmers and cotters—a stubborn, daring man—to venture within the precincts of the haunted Grange at all, and rash beyond all precedent, to contemplate a residence there. They maintained “no good would come of it—the spot was unhallowed—the spectre of the suicide Mistress Grenville walked the place at midnight, and never failed to punish intrusion on her demesne with death or madness !”

But the stalwart Cheshire yeoman was not the man to be deterred from his purpose by the idle fears or opinions of ignorant rustics. He had done battle with the world in his younger days, had gained information from men and books possessed at that time by few of his class, and despised the credulity which peopled every deserted mansion with tenants from the spirit-world. “When I see a ghost,” he said, “I will believe in one, but not till then.”

Margaret Grenville was the only child of a “younger son,” who died a soldier’s death in India, leaving her to the care of his elder and unmarried

brother. But when dear young housekeepers quit elderly bachelor uncles for husbands and homes of their own, the bachelor-households seem to grow duller and more dreary every day. And so, when Margaret became Mrs. Ford, and retired with her bridegroom to his dwelling near Northwich, Sir Luke Grenville sat and dozed in his arm-chair, dreamed of marriage and cheerful feminine faces, and waked to solitude and silence. He fidgeted about, wandered from room to room, strolled through the gardens, tried fishing, hunting, and shooting, to beguile the tedium of the weary days, but all to no purpose. What availed his exploits in the field, if he had no one to listen to their narration by the fireside? Roystering squires would have come in shoals, it is true; but he was not a reveller, and disliked their noisy mirth. He missed the quiet step and mild face of Margaret; and, as he dozed and dreamed, and waked and mused, he somehow stumbled over the fact that there were other Margarets in the world, and that hunting or angling for a wife might be as pleasant and profitable a pursuit as chasing a fox for his brush, or wearily watching a float for a nibble or a bite.

Thus matrimonially disposed, Sir Luke became cognizant of the smiles and glances of a charming widow, whose pew at church was directly opposite to his own. This bewitching dame had a matrimonial

scheme in her head also, but she very sagaciously kept it to herself, so that when the old bachelor mentally decided that so pleasant a neighbour would make an agreeable companion, and invited her to become the mistress of the Manor House, no suspicion crossed the worthy knight's mind of the skilful manœuvres by which she had obtained the long coveted home and title.

Lady Grenville was decidedly *clever*, her “two incumbrances,” as she jocularly styled her son and daughter, were clever too; and when in 1790, Sir Luke died, full of years and foolish fancies, it was discovered that they had cleverly contrived to oust his once dear niece from her true place in his heart and his will. All his alienable property he had assigned to his widow and her heirs, and had the ancient seat of the family borne a better name or been more eligible, it is possible they would have endeavoured to dispossess her of that also.

Long years before death claimed Sir Luke, or a wily widow his lands, Michael Ford had been heard to regret that so goodly an estate should be suffered to lie waste through an idle story. “If every house in which a foul deed had been done were to be deserted,” he was wont to say—“if every lane in which murder had left crimson tracks were stopped, if every field in which the slaughtered dead had lain in ghastly heaps were to lie fallow, what would

England's millions do for homes or roads, or pasture, or harvest lands? Let the wrong done cling to the wrongdoer, and die out with the doer's life; but let not places be accursed from generation to generation because blood was shed or outrage committed on the senseless turf, or under the sightless roof! Places could not participate in crime; and though imagination could not fail to conjure up a recent tragedy on visiting the scene of its perpetration, still," he thought, "time ought to wash out blood-stains from a house as from a battle-field: and while there were so many foodless, houseless wanderers on the earth, those who permitted lands to remain untilled, or houses empty, through morbid fancy, were grossly culpable. For his own part, he believed the air around him to be filled with unseen spirits, but a man with conscience clear might walk erect at midnight through a charnel-house!"

No wonder then, that (holding such opinions) Michael's first care, on obtaining this accession to his property, was to find a tenant for his own homestead near Northwich, and then to visit the Grange, for the purpose of rendering it habitable, before removing his family thither. He knew it would be difficult to find an occupant for the ill-conditioned, ill-omened Grange, though an easy task to dispose of the highly-cultivated Ford-brook Farm. He knew also that it would require a strong mind and will to overcome

deeply-rooted prejudices, so as to make labour available on his new property, and none fitter than the owner to combat these difficulties, and restore the desolate mansion to its former state or value.

Having completed his brief survey, and ascertained that the lonely pile had not been wholly dismantled, the furniture in two rooms remaining as in Mistress Grenville's day, only dusty and dingy with neglect and age : he retraced his steps to the village inn, where he had left his steed, more jaded with bad roads than long distance ; for MacAdam had not then arisen to smoothe the roads beneath the horses' hoofs, and travelling in those days, whether vehicular, equestrian, or pedestrian, was little better than painful penance. After ascertaining from personal inspection that his horse had been well cared for, he proceeded to obtain refreshment for himself, and speech with the landlord.

The ruddy and jovial host of the Black Bear was at that moment in the common room, the centre of a group of open-mouthed listeners, all eager to learn something more of the new owner of the Grange than was already known ; whilst he, to enhance his own importance, appeared brimful of the information he was too sagacious to impart. In fact, the arrival of a well-mounted stranger, with holsters and saddle-bags, never failed to draw the villagers to the doors, and should he, as in the present instance, dismount,

thirsty curiosity was sure to leave the anvil, the adze, the awl, or the spade, to drink in ale and gossip at Ralph Horne's. Michael had made no secret of his errand or his name, and therefore had been warned and cautioned against his rash undertaking, not only by Ralph, and his rosy daughter Phœbe, but by the blacksmith, the wheelwright, the cobbler, and a chorus of smockfrocked rustics who crowded round the horse-block. But now that he had returned alive, with no further scath than miry boots, and cobwebbed cloak, astonishment was at its height, and Matthew Spark the blacksmith, affirmed he was "a brave and bold mon, and he loiked his sperrit!"

The summons of Ralph to the little sanded bar-parlour left curiosity and astonishment still agape, but the eyes and mouths opened wider when he returned accompanied by Michael Ford, who looked steadily around as he said, "I am told by the landlord here, that no one can be found in the village willing to accompany me to my house, either for love or money. Is this true?" The men shrank closer together, and jostled each other's shoulders, but none made reply. "For *love*, as I am a stranger," continued he, "it would be unfair to expect any man to leave his own work to wait upon me; but I do not scruple to ask, which of you, being well paid, will bear my saddle-bags to the Grange, with materials to kindle a fire, and refreshments to serve me until morning?"

"Goin' to bide i' th' Grange a' neeght? why, measter, you'll be clean demented ere th' mearn!" was the exclamation from lips which yet failed to reply to his question.

"Demented! with what, my good fellows? No honest man need fear aught, save thieves in a lonely dwelling, and as I am a scber man, well provided," (pointing to his pistols) "and carry with me no superfluity of gold, I need not fear midnight marauders. No man without crime at his heart trembles at shadows."

"Oi've no croime on moi hert, Mester Ford, nor do oi think have ony o' my neebors, yet oi conna make up moi moind to go nigh th' ha'nted Grange after neeght-fa' and oi'm sure a' here are of moi moind;" answered the sturdy smith, as spokesman for the body politic.

"But this is broad daylight. Do you ever go to church, my friends?"

"Ay, ay, sur; we are not hathens, sure-ly!" was the general response.

"Do you pass through the churchyard on winter nights?"

"Yoi, or we could na' get to th' church or to Mester Latham's without goin' a moile round?" again replied Matthew Spark.

"And why should Grenville Grange have more terrors for you than the churchyard, where poor Mistress Grenville was buried? (you know she was

not consigned to the cross-roads.) Rupert Grenville, too, whose hand was red with a brother's blood, lies there, yet none of you are affrighted. Why, then, should the Grange be more terrible? I hope, for the honour of Cheshire, I have not come amongst a race of cowards; who would see me plod with a heavy load, hence to my place, though already weary with travel, rather than earn a good day's pay, and all for fear of—nothing."

"Well, measter, oi neer was called a coward afore, an' oi neer was one, but mony a mon besoide me is afeert o' a woman even o' flesh an' blood, let alone a sperrit; but oi'll een go wi' ye an' leeght yer foire; it shonna be said as how Matthew Spark was afeert i' dayleeght o' that another man 'ud face at mid-neeght. So Ralph, mak haste and gie us th' bags an' provender, an' let 's set off," said the smith, turning towards the landlord, who hustled away to provide what the traveller had previously ordered.

Miles Wood, the stout young wheelwright, whose open face had for some time revealed the struggle in his breast between superstitious fear and new-born shame, prompted, it may be, by a latent desire to win by his manly daring the favour of pretty Phœbe, also stepped forward and proffered his assistance to Mr. Ford and Mathew. And now, as though courage was as contagious as fever or fear, one by one the bystanders expressed their willingness to join the

adventurous few, until Michael Ford found himself at the head of a numerous party, and though at another time he might have felt disposed to decline their gratuitous attendance, as placing him in a somewhat ludicrous position, at present, he thought it desirable to foster any display tending to overcome the general repugnance to approach the Grange, though he could not forbear smiling when he heard some of the most timorous of the clodpates vociferating as they went, “ Whose afeert, whose afeert ?”

By-and-bye, however, as the pointed gables of the old building became visible above the distant trees, the courage of these noisy adherents, like that of Bob Acres, “ oozed out at their finger-ends ; ” their pace slackened, they lagged behind, and finally with one accord the pusillanimous volunteers rushed back to the village with the startling intelligence, that “ The Squire, Mat Spark, Moiles Wood, an’ Job Last, ha’ gone in at th’ gateway, under th’ very noses o’ th’ stone griffins.”

That these white-faced men ever expected to see their friends again, sound in mind and body, is very questionable ; yet though they had turned and fled from a nameless dread of a bodiless shape, these very men had thews and sinews fitted to endure the utmost rigours of a soldier life, had such been their vocation ; and placed “ i’ th’ imminent deadly breach,” would neither have faltered nor blenched, but borne

the name of Englishmen bravely and manfully, amid the rattle of artillery and the deadly shower of shot. And let no blame attach to these uneducated men of a past generation for the terror they displayed ; men of note and culture shared the feeling with them. The inhabitants of our largest cities were not free from a belief in supernatural visitations, and therefore the dwellers in our rural districts might well be excused if they were more strongly tainted with the common infection. The spiritual world was then an awful sublimity, invested with strange fascination and terrible mystery. No vulgar "mediums" had professed communion with the shades of the departed by rapping on parlour tables ; violating at once orthography and common sense. It remained for modern invention to familiarize and vulgarize converse with the invisible ; it remained for the tea-table gossips of this century to press their fingers on the mahogany, and presume to put flippant questions to the spirits of Shakspeare and Milton : the tea-table gossips of the past century, though less scientifically educated, and superstitious withal, spoke of ghosts with fear and trembling, and held the spirits of the dead in awe and reverence.

The key turned in the lock much more readily than might have been anticipated from its long disuse, and admitted Michael and his three silent followers into a spacious hall, paved with large red and

black tiles, placed diamond-wise. On either hand a door opened into a small room ; passing beyond these, the hall branched off to the right and left in a long narrow passage, towards the large rooms in each wing, and also to those at the back of the building. This passage was lit by lancet windows pierced in the front wall, and corresponded with the corridor above ; communication with the two being attained by means of a broad winding staircase, with massive balustrades of carved oak, and lit by one long narrow window which overlooked the court-yard at the back, and served also to light the entrance-hall. Up this staircase Michael Ford led the way, and crossing the corridor, entered the room before him, an apartment of lofty and noble proportions, situated immediately above the entrance-hall and side-rooms, thus occupying the entire centre of the edifice, which, I should have intimated, consisted of a broad projecting front, connected by the corridors with two wings, somewhat less expansive and prominent.

Matthew and his companions hesitated, and exchanged glances, seemingly unwilling to follow the "Squire" beyond the threshold of this room, but on his summons to advance they came forward, though with considerable trepidation—this was evidently one of the haunted chambers. And to one acquainted with its story, the aspect of the apartment bore a sad significance. Near the window stood a work-table,

on which lay a tangled heap of faded silks ; an embroidery frame, with its piece of unfinished work, lay on the chair beside it, as if thrown down in haste ; chairs were overturned ; the centre table held bottles and glasses, cards and dice in strange confusion ; the embers of the last fire yet remained on the hearth ; and but for the thick dust which lay on everything it might have passed as the scene of a recent revel.

Here a fire was with some difficulty kindled, the wide fireplace at first vomiting forth as much smoke as passed up the huge chimney. A portion of the superabundant dust was removed from the table, a cumbrous chair (the least uneasy of the stiff-backed collection) drawn to the side of the hearth fronting the door, and then the extemporary servitors hastened to depart, for the sun was setting in a crimson sky, and they feared to loiter until dusk in so questionable a locality.

In vain Michael pressed money on them in payment of their services, both Miles and Matthew protesting they " did na' come for th' sake o' th' money ; not a' th' gold in your purse 'ud ha' tempted us under this roof, measter, still less into this frightful room (though there be a more awful room i' th' Grange than this), but yo' are a downreeght straight-for'ard outspoken mon, and braver than manny a redcoat feeghting in Indee now, or yo'd be fleered \*

\* Affrigled.

to bide here, and though yo' did say as how we were a' cowards, should yo' ere want anny one to serve yo' neeght or day, Matthew Spark's yo'r mon!" exclaimed the smith, striking the clenched fist of the right hand into the open palm of the left, as he would bring a hammer down on his anvil.

"Oi say the same as Mat!" said Miles, with a sideway approving nod of his head.

"An' oi too, for you're as stanch a gentleman as ever wore shoe-leather," chimed in little Job Last.

"If you will not accept payment for your time, I suppose you will not refuse to drink my health on my accession to this estate, so bid the host of the Black Bear broach some of his best ale, and do you make yourselves merry withal, and I will discharge the reckoning; but I owe you more than thanks, or even a glass of ale, for your goodwill, though I *do* thank you truly. Good day!"

"Good day and a quiet neeght measter!" and the trio hurried away, down the path, over the rotting bridge and through the Griffin-gate as fast as their legs could carry them without an absolute run.

Michael smiled as he watched their hasty departure, then closing the outer door with bolt and bar, retraced his steps to the ancient drawing-room. The noise of the closing door reverberated through the empty pile, and hollow echoes followed his steps, but he never heard them, or if he did, he was too much occupied

with his own thoughts to be moved by echoes. He was calculating the possible cost of repairs and improvements, and the length of time workmen might take, before the place would be fit to receive his wife and daughter; and calculations of that class are too prosaic to admit any freaks of imagination. He closed the door to exclude the draught, for the autumn winds were blowing keenly without, and an unmistakable breeze swept up the staircase and along the corridor; then he strode to the window to survey the cheerless aspect of the grounds, and cogitate how to turn them to the best advantage. After a time he turned to examine minutely the carved panels surrounding the room, representing in different medallions various scenes from the life of the Patriarch Joseph, the envied "dreamer of dreams," the governor of all Egypt.

Dust and deepening twilight made this a very unprofitable investigation, so he betook himself to his high-backed arm-chair, replenished his fire, lit a small lamp, with which he was provided, mixed a glass of brandy and water, drew from his saddle-bags sundry comestibles, with which his good dame and Ralph Horne had amply supplied him; from his capacious pockets brought out a tobacco-box (the Black Bear had provided a pipe), and the *Chester Chronicle*, evidently designing to make himself comfortable. But the wind rushing in through sundry broken panes

threatened to extinguish his lamp, so he rose wearily, with a muttered protest against the trouble, and with much ado contrived to close the heavy shutters, whose rusty hinges creaked a louder protest than his own. That done, he remembered his pistols, and, half smiling at his own caution, examined the flints and the priming, before he laid them on the table close at hand. Another return to the edibles, a fresh dip into the *Chester Chronicle*, a whiff of the pipe, and Michael became aware of another rustle than that of the paper he held; a decided rustle or flutter, which had indeed been audible for some time, had not he been too busy with his knife and fork to heed it, but there it was, just above his head, increasing every moment, then followed a faint screech, a wilder flutter, another scream, and another, louder—he grasped a pistol, listened attentively—the voice continued, apparently proceeding from the chimney; he fired upwards, and brought down—soot enough to have extinguished his fire had it been smaller, and a nest of *owls*!

Amazement held him speechless for a moment, then the roof rang with his exuberant laughter at the ridiculous catastrophe he had provoked. The cries of these poor birds recalled him to himself. They were speedily released from their uncomfortable quarters on the heated hearth, when, discovering that they were more frightened than hurt, he, ever compassionate, and also

wise beyond his time, though a farmer, opened shutters and window and let the fluttering intruders out into the night.

His next care was the choked-up fire; that awakened once more to warmth and cheerfulness, he resumed his pipe and newspaper, not, however, before he had vented a few expletives on his own stupidity for firing up the chimney: "Common sense might have taught me what to expect, even if my ears did not. I suppose the heat of the fire had but gradually warmed the old chimney, and aroused the slumbering inhabitants. It is a question whether I or the owlets were most dismayed. What a fool I have been, to be sure!"

Whether the brandy and water, the pipe, or the dose of politics, or the fire, or his long ride, proved the strongest soporific, or whether they exerted a combined influence, chroniclers do not say; but certain it is the paper and pipe dropped from his hands, his eyelids drooped, and his chin—he was asleep.

Asleep!—The night was gone; the sunlight streamed through the window on a melancholy woman with a pale face and flaxen hair, bending over her embroidery frame with a preoccupied look. Her husband and another man sat at the table drinking, dicing, and quarrelling; her husband was losing; his companion had a strange gleam in his malignant eye, which ever and anon cast a repulsive glance at the

fair embroideress. The stakes ran high ; he lost fortune, home ; and, at the suggestion of the archfiend with whom he played, with a gambler's increasing infatuation, staked—what !—not his wife ? Yes, his wife, his startled wife, and *lost* ! The winner rose with an exultant laugh to claim his prize ; but the frenzied woman dashed past him, rushed along the corridor, pursued by the ruffian to her own chamber ; there was a brief struggle ; a knife lay within her reach ; in an instant she had seized and plunged the glittering blade in her long-troubled heart, and the crimson tide welled out at the feet of her destroyer. There was a hurried rush through the house of a madman towards the river, a tramp of feet, a cry—Michael was awake ! awake, and conscious of a dark figure standing by the doorway.

He caught up his remaining pistol and fired ; the figure remained immovable.

A cold dew stood on the strong man's forehead. Had he laughed at spirits all his life, to become the dupe of imagination now ?

With a powerful effort he strode towards the dark object ; it was his own riding-cloak hung there by himself when he first came in. He strove to laugh, but this time it was a very feeble cachinnation, for his dream was fresh in his mind, and footsteps *were* outside in the corridor. “Can some one be playing me a trick, or am I yet asleep ?” he asked himself.

"But no ; those village chickens could not muster heart to come hither. But yet"—listening, then—"I *will* see for myself ;" so saying, with lamp in one hand and the exploded pistol in the other, he passed into the corridor.

A tall, grey figure, rendered apparent by a light emanating from itself, and surrounding it like a halo, was gliding towards the haunted chamber. He followed—it entered, and disappeared as he reached the door.

How it vanished, or where, he could not tell. With his lamp he explored the room, but no creature could he find. There were the dark stains on the floor, the disordered draperies and carpet, all telling of the long past death-struggle, but no trace of living humanity.

Awed and perplexed in spite of himself, Michael returned to the drawing-room, unwilling to believe in a ghostly visitant, yet it must be conceded, much less assured in his scepticism. The only conclusion he could arrive at, after due deliberation, was that the place had unconsciously, without any volition of his own, associated itself in his mind with the story of the tragedy enacted there, so prompting his vivid dream, and the dream in turn creating a temporary hallucination which had deceived his half-asleep senses ; but he was wide awake now, and all *that* was past.

Wide awake, indeed ! Neither paper, pipe, nor

brandy (and he partook of the last much more freely than usual) could induce the semblance of a doze. His busy mind was occupied with endeavours to work out a problem he found it impossible to solve. Had he deceived himself or not; were the seeming foot-steps real or imaginary; and what, in the former superposition, could produce them? Was it the flapping of ivy against the staircase and corridor windows; or were there rats about the premises? But the luminous grey figure—was *that* a reality or an optical illusion? It must be the latter; he was convinced of it. However conclusive this decision might be, he found himself perpetually revolving the same questions in his mind, and invariably with the same result.

Often during the night had he drawn his bulky silver watch from its fob, and marvelled that the hours lagged so heavily. He opened the shutters and waited for the dawn, which came at length, grey and cold; and as soon as day had fairly set her foot upon the level ground, betook himself to a pump in the court-yard, and laved hands, neck, and face, to refresh himself after his night-watch, and wash away his doubts.

Thus invigorated he sought the mysterious bed-chamber, examined it in every nook and corner, looked behind the heavy hangings of bed and window, under the bed and dusty toilet-table drapery, rapped at every panel, in hope to detect a secret

door by the hollow sound, pressed every prominent knob in the carving in search of a hidden spring, but all in vain; he could discover no outlet from the chamber, save the door by which he entered, and another close by in the corner, at right angles with it. The figure, if figure there had been, must have passed through that doorway. Yet he remembered seeing it cross the room and disappear as if by magic near the fire-place. However, nothing daunted, he opened this door, stepped across a square landing into another room quite empty; thence into a second room, likewise desolate, and returned by another door to the square landing on which all three opened, then up an opposite staircase to similar rooms above, also bare, back to the landing, and thence down a flight of steps, which, turning at the bottom, admitted him at once into an extensive kitchen lying immediately beneath the two rooms he had just explored, the stairs projecting into the apartment even beyond the rude latch-held door, like the brown feet of a huge giant from beneath his robe. This kitchen, like the hall, was paved with diamond tiles, alternate red and black, but smaller, and held two other doors, one into the extensive grass-grown court-yard, the other into the dining-room beneath the haunted chamber, which had an entrance from the lower corridor as that had from the upper. Nimble mice hurried out of his unwonted presence, and peered

shyly from minute crevices at the strange intruder ; otherwise all was still, all deserted ; and he abandoned his search at last, more than ever convinced he was the victim of bad brandy and pie-crust.

## CHAPTER II.

## MR. LATHAM'S FRIEND.

THE appearance of the new squire at the Black Bear was a signal for a general assemblage of the village worthies, to slake at once their thirst and their curiosity, notwithstanding the early morning hour. Much they marvelled at his unperturbed aspect. The barrier of deferential awe which fences round the country gentleman was broken down by the unprecedented circumstances attending his advent amongst them, and many were the inquiries how he had spent the night, and what he had seen or heard? His reply was a relation of his adventures with the owls and his own shot-riddled cloak, followed by a laugh at credulity in general, and ghosts in particular. A *very* keen observer might have detected a latent want of heartiness in his laugh, which echoed the newly-born doubts in his mind, doubts unacknowledged even to himself, but existing nevertheless. He laughed, however, and loudly, too loudly perhaps; influenced,

no doubt, by his desire to allay the fears of the eager throng so as to render them useful neighbours.

But his business at Shotwick was not to feast the eyes or ears of a gaping crowd, but to obtain labourers to clear the grounds and repair the dilapidated buildings under his own supervision. A bootless errand he found it : men there were, willing to work, but not in or near the Grange : for some of the outlying fields he certainly had a few tardy volunteers, but the immediate object of his attention was the dwelling itself, and that might have been a lazarus-house, it was shunned so universally.

So Michael Ford had no resource but to seek workmen elsewhere, and trust to time and his own example to wear out their prejudices. He, however, engaged the smith and wheelwright to make a new plough and a cart, giving his orders with a promptness and precision, which told a thorough knowledge of farming implements and fitness for business. He was liberal too, though not profuse ; would “ pay well for work when well done, but on no account tolerate bad materials or bad workmanship.” And the two sturdy craftsmen said, as he turned away, “ Yon’s the reeght sort o’ mon to work for !” And they were not far wrong.

Michael had brought his saddle-bags with him from the Grange, and was busied by the side of his horse in expediting the adjustment of girth and stirrup prior

to his departure, when, on raising his head, he observed a young man of prepossessing appearance advancing at a brisk pace. From his garb, gaiters, shot-belt, dogs and gun, it was evident he meditated the destruction of game that bright autumnal morning ; and, if his eye was only as true, and his hand as steady as his step was firm, the birds might dread his approach.

The shock-headed ostler "made a leg," and pulied his forelock as he drew near, while Ralph Horne, who stood with his hands in his breeches pockets, and his short fat legs astride blocking the doorway, saluted the new comer with, "Good morning, Mester Latham, I hope all your folks are hearty."

"Quite well, I thank you, Ralph ; but I have a message for Phœbe, where is she ?"

"Phœbe, here's young Mester Latham asking for thee," bawled the inkeeper, as a sort of indirect two-edged reply, and presently Phœbe made her appearance, smoothing down the folds of a clean apron, and giving a final pat to a coquettish little cap, much resembling those worn at the present day as a badge of servant-girlishm.

"Good Morrow, rosy cheeks ; are you very busy to-day ? If not, my mother will be glad to see you at the lodge, she has somewhat to say to you."

"Not so busy, Master George, but I can spare time for Madame Latham, if she requires me. I have kneaded the dough for our week's batch, but Molly

can take charge of the baking for once in a way. I'll be there in less than an hour.

Nodding his head familiarly, the young sportsman turned sharply on his heel, and accidentally jostled Mr. Ford, who was about to mount his horse. With a courtesy very different to his late cursory leave-taking, the young gentleman raised his hat, apologised, and "presumed he had the honour of addressing the new owner of the Grange."

"Yes, young gentleman; and, if I mistake not, I see in you a descendant of that dissolute Latham who brought desolation to the Grange."

"You are mistaken, Mr. Ford, a relative only, not a descendant. I trust my blood came to me through purer channels."

"As we are likely to be neighbours, I am glad to hear it. At a future day I shall be pleased to become better acquainted; now, I am in haste, to reach Chester in order to procure workmen to restore the old place, since I can obtain none here."

"Our paths lie together," said Mr. Latham, as he strode along by the side of the horse, "can I be of any service to you?"

"If you can recommend a respectable builder in the city to whom I can apply, you will assist me much, for I am a stranger there."

"Mr. Peover of Watergate will, I think, be just the person you need. He employs a large number of

hands, and will contract for the entire work, so as to relieve you of much trouble. Though somewhat peculiar in manner, you will find him punctual and straightforward: two uncommon qualifications in a builder."

"I am obliged to you. I presume I can use your name, Mr. Latham?"

"Certainly. Mr. Peover is not very accessible to strangers, but he and my late father had many transactions together, in fact, were old cronies; and you will find my name a passport to his good graces. But I will not detain you: good morning."

"Good morning." Hats were raised with the ceremonious courtesy of an age we are too apt to contemn; and the rider, urging his steed forward, passed out of the young man's sight, as he turned from Shotwick Lane into the turnpike road leading from Parkgate to Chester.

A brisk ride of five or six miles brought him to the ancient city. Entering at Northgate Street, he passed slowly under the dark arch of the North gate, then a cumbrous and incongruous erection, with the foetid and revolting cells of the ancient gaol above, below, and around it. Here, far away from Christian ken, were chambers hewn deep down in the solid rock, horrible to contemplate. In one—the "Dead Man's Hole"—where condemned criminals awaited, in loathsome life, a doom less terrible than its disgusting grip,

snakes and other venomous reptiles gambolled in congenial filth, whilst the only air which had access to its depths came through pipes communicating with the street. But the chamber of "Little Ease," so notorious when Puritanic piety purged Chester of its loyal sins, was surely a device of the devils. Imagine a hole hewn out in a rock, the breadth across from side to side seventeen inches from the back to the inside of the massive door. At the top seven inches, at the shoulders eight inches, and at the breast nine inches and a half—with a *device to lessen the height* accordingly as it was minded to torture the unfortunate mortal crammed or jammed into the hideous recess. Think over these dimensions as given by a contemporary writer, and then imagine man, woman, or child compressed within for any crime, however heinous !

But Michael Ford glanced upwards, as he rode under the frowning pile, ignorant of its uses or the fearful secrets deep down beneath his horse's hoof-tracks. And well for him was his ignorance, for he had a kindly nature, and the bare suggestion of such horrors might have interfered with his appetite and digestion. As it was, he stopped at the Blue Posts in Mercer's Row, with a keen appreciation of the savoury odours issuing from the remote kitchen of the antiquated inn, and partook of his mid-day meal with a relish provoked by a brisk ride over a rough road, undisturbed by the proximity of the prison. He

had spent the night preceding his adventurous watch at the Grange, at the Blue Posts : and his satisfaction at his entertainment had induced an inclination to return, and, indeed, make the hostel his headquarters whenever business or pleasure should call him to Chester. Whilst his own dinner was preparing, he had, as was his wont, visited the stables to assure himself that Tony, his steed, was properly cared for ; and, after his own meal was despatched, would fain have thrown his Barcelona handkerchief over his head and indulged in a comfortable snooze, as he was rather drowsy. But business required his attention, and Michael never deferred to the morrow that which should be done to-day ; so he yawned, rose, stretched and shook himself, to dissipate the heaviness hanging over him, and then sallied forth.

Bending his steps westwards, he soon gained his destination in Watergate Street. This street was marked by that peculiar feature of Chester, namely, the high level *rows*, best, I think, described as arcade above arcade, or as covered passages for pedestrians *under* the overhanging houses, and *over* the lower row of shops—shops in some cases on a level with the street, in others sunk beneath it. Entrance to these rows, arcades, galleries, or what you will, was obtained by flights of steps here and there ; and as they contained a second row of shops, built over the back rooms of the basement story, where ladies might “go

shopping" in the wettest of weather, without danger to satinet or bombazine, the Hackney Coach Act was until very recently almost a nullity, as far as Chester was concerned. It must be understood that these verandas, or arcades, bore no resemblance to anything anywhere else, not to the Quadrant, not to Burlington or Lowther Arcades, as they possessed no architectural symmetry. The houses were of all shapes and proportions, gables and fronts in heterogeneous confusion ; sometimes pillars supported the upper floors of the houses, in other places blank, and often unsightly walls ; and, as may be imagined, light was not too strong in these mercantile stores.\*

The abode of Mr. Peover was one of the quaintest houses in this extraordinary locality : it was an antique black-and-white timber-and-plaster building, with its gable towards the street, from which a flight of steps gave access to the door in the Row. The upper rooms of the house were supported by rude wooden pillars, and a balustrade as rude served to protect children, tipplers, or other light-headed travellers from involuntary summersaults into the street below.

Two hundred years before, when this was a new house, it had been the residence of some man of rank, who had left the impress of his greatness in

\* Though the Rows of Chester are spoken of in the past tense, in most cases the description is equally applicable in the present day.

armorial bearings carved on the beams ; but it had seen many changes since that period, and in the seventeenth century been marked by a special providence.

When the plague ravaged the city, dealing death and desolation on every hand ; when the pest-carts traversed the streets at midnight, with their mouth-muffled attendants announcing their awful errand by the ringing bell and the portentous cry “ Bring forth your dead ! ” when the wail for the dead was subdued by the care for the dying ; when the dread of infection winnowed households of their chaff, and left but the pure grain behind to its offices of love or mercy ; when the uncoffined dead were shot out of the pest-carts into one common grave, without mourners or funereal rites, amidst the hideous jests and brutal depravity of the moral lepers, who were at once undertakers and sextons ; when every other house bore the plague-stricken sign of the red-cross, this house alone escaped the dread contagion. Though delirium and fever raved and raged around it, in this one house was health. To mark his gratitude for this signal immunity, the owner had caused to be carved on one of the cross-beams in front of the favoured dwelling, the inscription, “ 1652. GOD'S PROVIDENCE IS MINE INHERITANCE. 1652.” And it is still known as “ God's Providence House.”

Under that designation Michael had been directed

to the house of Mr. Latham's friend, the builder, by some half-ragged urchins playing at duck-stone on the causeway ; and, as in crossing the street, he paused to read the remarkable record, unaware of the tradition attached to the spot, by some mental process, apart from his thought or will, he seemed to identify the individual he came to seek with the text he had just perused, and wondered if there was really any connection between house and owner.

An elderly woman, of grave exterior, opened the door in answer to Mr. Ford's summons ; she was dressed in a gown of sombre hued stuff, with no trimming or adornments ; a clear cambric kerchief lay in regular folds across her bosom, and passed under her boddice ; her smoothly banded hair was covered by a linen mob-cap with a broad band of black ribbon around the head ; and an apron, also of white linen, completed the attire of as respectable a serving woman as might well be met with even in those days.

" Is Mr. Peover at home ? " inquired Michael.

" Yes ! my master is at home," was the quiet reply.

" Can I see him ? "

" What may be your business ? " was the rejoinder, in the same quiet tone.

" That is my affair and Mr. Peover's, I should think ! "

"Yes, sir, no doubt ; but my master never sees any stranger who will not state his business first."

"Very well, if that be the case, say that my name is Ford ; that I come from Northwich, and am recommended to him to repair an old mansion for me."

Gravely inclining her head in token of assent, she left him standing in the gloomy passage while she went up-stairs with her message. A door opened, and he heard a sharp, quick, but not unpleasant voice, say, "Can't see him, can't see him ; don't know him ; too much work on hand ; can't undertake the job !"

There was a faint murmur, as of a female voice ; then the returning footsteps of the woman, interrupted by the former speaker, "Mayhap you are right ;" and in raised tones, "Stop, Margery ! ask where the house is, and who recommended me."

Margery, as though quite accustomed to the office of interpreter between the builder and his customers, on descending, said :

"Master desires to know where the house is situated, and also the name of the person who gave the recommendation."

Had not Michael Ford been prepared for Mr. Peover's peculiarities, it is probable he would have left the house at once, and sought a builder elsewhere. As it was, he calmly replied, "Say to your master that the premises are those of Grenville Grange, the gentleman Mr. Latham !"

Again the sober domestic ascended the stairs with deliberate step, to convey the information required.

Michael heard a chair pushed hastily back, as if by the astonished speaker, whose ejaculation: "Latham and Grenville Grange! Latham and Grenville Grange! Impossible! such a thing was never heard of; it's some trick, some trick!" was followed by the low murmurs of the feminine voice. Then came, "Show the gentleman into the office, Margery; I'll think about it."

So the "gentleman" was shown into the "office," a small low wainscoted room dimly lighted by the window fronting the row. A massive oak table, drawn close to the window, was covered with plans and papers, whilst the walls were decorated with various architectural designs, framed and unframed. In one corner was a paviour's rammer and pick, with sundry masons' tools, the whole in a state of neatness, precision, and freedom from dust, more in accordance with Margery's mien than her master's abrupt tones. As it took Mr. Peover some little time to "think about it," Michael had leisure to scan the place, and note the discrepancy between the paving tools and the papers.

Presently Mr. Peover, having evidently thought about it satisfactorily, descended the stairs with a rapid step, and entered the room as if with a jerk. He was a man of middle height, wiry, yet well pro-

portioned, with unpowdered silvery hair, prominent nose, irresolute mouth, and penetrating, restless, anxious eyes ; which, however, gleamed with an intelligent and kindly light beneath his massive brows. His dress was plain and simple ; not a speck was on his snuff-brown kerseymere suit ; no embroidery was round the pocket-flaps of either coat or lengthy vest ; his breeches were fastened below the knees with plain steel buckles, corresponding with the wide ones which spanned his instep to secure the polished shoes ; his black worsted hose, of ribbed knitting, spoke of household industry ; while the neckerchief and unfrilled, unruffled shirt were faultless in fit and whiteness.

A more marked contrast between the two men in outward seeming could scarcely be imagined, not merely on account of Mr. Ford's lofty proportions and muscular frame, his manly face and resolute eye, but in apparel. Never over particular about his garb so that it was of good materials, tolerable fit, and suited the requirements of his life and station, he was to-day in unusual disorder. His hasty morning toilet at the pump, though sufficient to remove soot and dust from his skin, had scarcely made him presentable in the city ; his fine black hair was in disorder ; his neckcloth awry ; his top-boots, hat, and cloak dusty ; and the latter, besides, pierced with numberless small holes, reducing it in appearance to a moth-eaten garment.

But Mr. Peover could see a man under his clothes, and his first words were a brief apology for detaining him, very brief and characteristic: "Sorry to have kept you, Mr. Ford ; couldn't help it ; always do it ; don't like strangers ; seldom see them ! Be seated" (indicating a seat with his hand) ; "and now, before I make any promises I might not like to keep, nor dare to break, answer me a question or two ; stop," seeing Michael about to speak, "I don't ask the questions from curiosity ;—nor impertinently—certainly not impertinently ; but to resolve doubts ; to resolve doubts."

"Anything consistent with propriety, or essential to the adjustment of our business, I am willing to answer, but nothing more, sir."

"Well, well ! quite right ! Are you the owner or tenant of God's Providence House?" *Grenville Gra*

"The owner."

"By purchase or inheritance?"

"By inheritance, through my wife, who was Margaret Grenville, the last of the name."

"Um ! How came George Latham to send you to me?"

"I saw him by accident, and asked the name of a respectable builder."

"Accident, accident ! there are no such things as accidents ; there is a Providence ; no accidents !"

"I do not see any very special Providence directing

my choice of a contractor to repair an ill-conditioned house."

"Ill-conditioned, indeed! No Providence directing a Latham to help, however remotely, to repair the ruin caused by a Latham? We differ—we differ."

"Well, sir, this is irrelevant to my business. Are you willing to take the matter in hand, or shall I seek elsewhere?"

"Not irrelevant, not! Don't think you'd find another man in Chester would venture his men to put trowel or plummet on that Grange. Sure not—sure not!"

"Am I to understand, then, that you will contract for the repairs?"

"Certainly, certainly; anything for George Latham; fine young man; son of my only friend."

This decided, Michael proceeded to state his requirements, and, with a view to their better understanding, it was arranged that the two should ride over the following day, and give the house and its appurtenances a minute inspection. Then, with much cordiality, the eccentric builder, discovering that it must be four o'clock, invited Mr. Ford to have a homely dish of tea with himself and wife; and when Michael pleaded his disordered habiliments as an excuse, muttered: "Dress, dress; what's dress but the heart's disguise? Do you think I was always as prim as now? not I; not I; I wore odden grey, not kerseymere, and

I handled the tools in that corner in *my* young days."

"Indeed ; you surprise me!"

"Surprise, or not, 'tis true. I keep those implements as an antidote to pride, when I feel it rising ; wealth is sorely provocative of that great sin—sorely!"

"But surely there is an honest pride attached to the wealth gained by persevering industry."

Ah, well, yes ; perhaps so ; but——" and he hesitated ; "that pick and rammer keep down pride —keep down pride ! They are just reminders ; reminders ! That's right, sir, leave your hat and cloak here ; now follow me, and don't break your shins up this dim staircase!"

As he said this, he led the way up the uneven stairs, and, talking all the way, ushered the acquaintance of an hour into the household room, and presence of his wife ; "Martha, my dear, I have brought a guest to share your hospitality ; Mr. Ford, Mrs. Peover."

This was a rare occurrence, for he held aloof from acquaintances, and his only friend had passed away before him. George Latham's name must, indeed, have been a talisman, since it proved a passport to his heart and hearth.

"The lady rose on their entrance ; acknowledged Michael's formal bow with as formal a curtsey ; and after a few words of welcome, reached an additional

cup, saucer, and spoon, from a corner-cupboard, and resumed her place at the tea-board.

This was, literally, a board; being an oval tray of polished Honduras mahogany, with a slightly raised edge; the cups were those tiny handleless importations from China, now only seen in old curiosity shops, or preserved as family relics, their very size bearing testimony how costly was the fragrant and refreshing beverage they held: the dumpling-shaped tea-pot and the slop-basin corresponded in size and grotesque pattern with the cups and saucers; the silver teaspoons, necessarily small and light, were delicately shaped, with shell-like bowls: the sugar-basket and cream-ewer of silver filigree, were lined with jasper, and the (to us) Liliputian tea equipage was completed by a pair of quaintly carved mother-o'-pearls sugar-tongs hinged with tortoise-shell. Nor must the casket which contained the precious leaf be overlooked, since the old lady herself pointed it out to her guest as the work and gift of the unfortunate Mistress Grenville, thirty years before, on the day they both were married; and she consequently resigned her post of lady's maid. It was a tea-caddy of paper filigree work; a class of elegant trifling-with-time industry, extinct since the schooldays of our grandmothers. On a frame of common wood were gummed closely rolled strips of variously coloured paper, the one set of edges being fastened to the box, the other presenting its many con-

volutions to view. These little rolls or filigrees, were arranged in different devices, the rolls being sometimes slightly opened and compressed into the forms of leaves, petals, &c. It was tedious work ; yet if it exercised patience and ingenuity, and filled the vacuum now supplied by the pen and press, it was not altogether “ busy idleness.”

The tea was, however, but a small component of the evening meal ; Margery supplied the table with home-made cakes, and sundry appetising solids, very acceptable to a man away from the comforts of his own home, and Michael did full justice to the viands. During the repast, preceded by a reverent grace, he had little leisure to observe his hostess, but the quiet dignity of her manner impressed him ; she had evidently long outlived the state of dependence, or had been a lady's maid of superior order even then. During the converse which succeeded, in which she bore a fluent yet intelligent part, he scanned her more narrowly ; her connection with the Grenvilles having unconsciously invested her with an interest apart from herself. In person she was spare, her face shrewd, yet benevolent ; her clear hazel eye varied in expression with every turn in the conversation, but reflection and self-possession were dominant in every lineament. Her dress might have been a duplicate of Margery's in arrangement, though not in material. The cap, kerchief, and apron, were Indian muslin,

or French cambric, the black gown not homely stuff, but rich French silk, which rustled as she moved ; and her peg-heeled velvet shoes had silver buckles.

She had plied her knitting-pins very equably during the evening ; but when Mr. Ford, pleading fatigue, rose to depart, she laid her knitting aside to prepare for him a cup of mulled elder wine, made by herself, and which she recommended as an excellent preparation for the pillow.

Alas ! for the loss of those homely household habits, which, in the home manufacture of diet and drinks, set adulteration at defiance, and made hospitality genial and genuine ! Our boasted progress is in many things but a retrograde movement.

Michael could not decline the cordially offered "night-cap," but departed immediately after he had donned it, and, by eight o'clock, was soundly asleep in an exceedingly somnolent room at the Blue Posts.

Seven in the morning saw Michael and Mr. Peover at the door of the inn, mounted and ready to depart for the Grange, "Early to bed and early to rise," being alike the maxim of country and town. The autumnal morning was grey and cold ; the dust eddied in whirlwinds in the streets ; in the open country the withered leaves danced about in fantastic gyrations ; the branches of the scattered trees tossed wildly in the fitful breeze, and showered their faded

foliage down as the Mammonite casts off his friends when their power of service is past. On the pasture lands the sheep huddled together; the cows tossed their heads and whisked their tails in frantic attempts to disperse their irritating enemies—the flies ; and the swallows, not yet sure it was time to depart to other climes, skimmed lightly over the surface of the pools.

“ We shall have rain before long,” observed Michael, drawing his cloak closely around him ; “ if we do not hasten we shall scarcely complete our survey of the grounds before it is down upon us.”

“ Rain, rain ! I see no signs of rain ; there is a cool breeze, but the clouds seem light and fleecy—very fleecy.”

“ Ah, you are not a farmer. The clouds *are* fleecy, and there are some dark ones scudding on to join the black mass hanging over Shotwick ; but, indeed, to me everything around speaks of rain, from the rooks overhead to the grass by the wayside, or the turning leaves.”

“ Neither I nor my horse like a gallop, Mr. Ford, but I would rather have the shaking than the soaking ; bad for rheumatism—bad for rheumatism,” and he urged his horse forward as he spoke.

“ If the dread of the Grange extends to Chester, how do you think your workmen will relish their task there ?” inquired Michael, after a pause.

"Shan't ask them—shan't ask them: employ no Chester men—no Chester men! have a medley from all counties; mean to use the freshest strangers in this work."

"May not the Shotwick people infect them?"

"Give 'em no chance—no chance. Send the men down by boat in the morning with provisions; take them back in the evening same way. Give them plenty of good ale, *good* ale; no need to go to the village for bad."

Michael smiled at the old man's sagacity, and complimented him thereon. They had now reached Shotwick; ducks and geese waddled noisily away from the approaching hoofs, heads were thrust from windows and doors, shrill voices called children out of the way, and amidst the clamour, the horsemen dismounted at the Black Bear, and tested the ale, pronounced on trial "Not so bad—not so bad, after all."

The horses properly cared for, Michael ordered a quantity of refreshments to be sent after them to the Grange.

"What for? What for?" asked Mr. Peover.

"Ourselves, or the workmen who follow us, if *we* do not need them," was the reply.

"Th' ostler says he dar'na go wi' them things to the Grange, squoire; what's to be dun?" asked Ralph Horne, with a rueful countenance.

"Never mind, Ralph, send pretty Phœbe to me ; I think we can manage it between us."

Phœbe came with a look of dismay on her pretty face, and dropping a curtsey, said timidly, "Please sir, father says you say I am to help you to carry the basket. I could not do it, sir ; I could not, indeed."

"Nay, Phœbe, I said I thought we might manage it between us, but not in the way you imagine. Suppose you were to go down to the village, do you not think a certain young smith or wheelwright would, either of them, do my errand to oblige *you* ? I observed some very significant glances on Tuesday. What say you ?"

Phœbe blushed like a poppy, hung her head, played with the strings of her apron, then looking askance at Mr. Peover, said slyly, "I'll try, sir."

What arts or blandishments she used is not for me to reveal, but she "tried" her powers of persuasion very effectually, returning in a very short time, accompanied by Miles Wood the wheelwright, and leaving Matthew Sparks hammering angrily at the shoe of a horse then standing in the forge, and which he could not leave. A bright smile and a sweet word rewarded his complaisance, as Miles shouldered the heavy basket, and followed the gentlemen, with a heart so light he scarcely felt the weight of the load on his shoulders. Pretty Phœbe !

## CHAPTER III.

## THE SECOND NIGHT AT THE GRANGE.

THE wall which enclosed the estate was found to be in a most ruinous condition, and Michael suggested the probability that the materials had been carried away to build sties and wood-sheds in the village, but Mr. Peover assured him not a human being in Shotwick, or for twenty miles round, would have dared to disturb a single stone.

"No, no," said he ; "gipsies may have camped here ; being undisturbed, built temporary huts with loose stones, but no neighbour has touched them with the legend fresh in his mind ; no, no !"

And so it proved ; more than one of these rude sheds being found in different directions. The repair of the wall Mr. Peover decided to be the first consideration. Mr. Ford was more anxious about the house itself, thinking the land and its defences might well wait until he and his family were on the

spot, and he could superintend the clearing of the grounds in person.

"Wrong there, wrong there ; knew Mistress Ford when she was a schoolgirl ; very mild, very quiet, but would grieve to see the old place such a wilderness ; must be trimmed ! must be altered !"

"Knew Margaret ? She never named you to me."

"Suppose not ; won't remember me. Was not a rich man then ; used to work for Sir Luke ; saw her gentle face when I went for orders. More than five-and-twenty years ago—five-and-twenty years ! She was like a child I had, older, but like, very like ;" the old man continued, sadly, "My Martha died—your Margaret lived, and made me think what my girl might have been had she lived too. My bud was early cropped, I hope to bloom in heaven—I hope to bloom in heaven !" and he doffed his hat reverently as he spoke.

"You have no children then, I presume, Mr. Peover ?" inquired his companion, as they traversed the weed-tangled paths.

"None of my own ! I've a wild slip of a nephew, who broke his mother's heart, and has done his best to break mine—to break mine ! I sent him to school, took him at fourteen as an apprentice ;—would have made a man of him : he was lazy, incorrigibly lazy ; one Chester fair met some scamps lazy as himself and thrice as wicked, learned their trade faster

than mine, robbed me, ran away, and I have seen him but once since—but once since!"

"What do you mean to do with this moat and rotten bridge?" he resumed, giving it a kick which sent the splinters flying in all directions; "fill it up, I suppose? no use now fighting days are over. Better grow grass than duckweed and tadpoles, eh?"

"That was my intention; but let us pass round the house; I see the storm gathering, and as you spoke of landing workmen, I should like to see how such a thing is to be accomplished, the river lies so far below the rock."

"Follow, I'll show you!" said the old man.

He threaded a tortuous path under the trees, across a second old bridge, through a gateless gateway on to the green sward beyond the walls, thence in a direct line to a flight of broad steps cut in the face of the rock, the lowest washed by the tide.

"When the Grange was inhabited a boat used to be moored alongside these steps for pleasure-trips; the ring which held the cable you see remains; the boat is gone, and the people—and the people!"

"There is a boat close under the rocks now," said Michael, "don't you think there is something very suspicious about that craft?"

"Um! ah! rather; ugly looking fellows those; hug the shore pretty closely. But what? God help us!"

Michael grasped the old man's arm, or he would have fallen into the water.

"What is the matter, my good friend? You seem ill, faint, perturbed."

"Nothing, nothing! a sudden sickness; went too near the edge, perhaps; am better now—better now."

His white face and restless eyes gave a blank denial to his words, but whatever his emotion, or whatever its cause, he soon rallied, and led the way back, discussing alterations and improvements with Mr. Ford as usual; a little more abruptly and disjointedly, perhaps, but only a little.

They entered the house just in time to escape the fury of the storm. Heavy drops had for some time been rattling on the leaves overhead, or plashing at intervals into the green moat, but now came down a perfect deluge, not to be encountered by kerseymere or broadcloth with impunity, and Mackintoshes were not.

The well-filled basket Miles had deposited in the porch (departing precipitately, his errand done), was lifted into the hall by Michael, with a complacent remark on his own forethought.

He led the way to the room he had previously occupied, kindled a fire with the fuel there provided, and proceeded to lay out the good things Miles had brought and Ralph supplied. It was long past noon,

so that dinner, however rudely spread, however homely in character, was something more than desirable to the two hungry men.

"Not one of those glasses! I could not drink from one of those glasses. I should shudder! They were touched years back by unholy lips; they are tainted—they are tainted!" was the sudden exclamation of Mr. Peover, as Michael, remembering his sudden faintness at the landing-steps, offered him wine in a glass taken from the table.

"I'm not superstitious, but I would have preferred one of the lower rooms," continued he; "why did you pitch on this one?"

"Because it was furnished. I could not very well eat and sleep and make merry in an empty room, in a desolate house; nor did I care to haul these cumbersome tables and chairs down-stairs, so took the good Providence had provided, and made myself as comfortable as I could under the circumstances."

"Providence! Do not misuse the word, it——"

"Nay, it is your own; you said there were no accidents—nothing but Providence!"

"Providence provided, say you?—nay the devil provided these. The work which left this room shut up with its sinful secret, when other rooms were filled with the life and hope and love of fresh tenants, was the work of the arch-fiend—Satan himself! Satan himself!"

"But was there not a Providence over all—inscrutable it may be—but Providence still?"

"You are right! you are right! It must be so. 'God's Providence *is* mine inheritance!'" and the old man looked upwards as he spoke, and once more reverently raised his three-cornered hat, which had not yet been laid aside.

"Well," said Michael, "I always carry with me a pocket-flask and drinking-horn. I have found the latter useful scores of times. Perhaps you will not object to that, if I fill it?"

The good wine served to recruit the old gentleman's spirits, and he discussed the cold fowl, boiled ham, and good Cheshire cheese, in utter oblivion of the angry storm without. The continued rain put a stop to further out-door inspection, but the interior of the premises required examination, which was given without delay.

After some consideration, it was arranged that the entire contents of the two "haunted chambers" should be removed to a large attic over the central hall, and the door built up, so as to remove out of sight completely, everything that could remind Mrs. Ford of her cousin's miserable fate, or keep alive superstitious feeling. The blood-stained flooring was to be partially relaid, in case the plane would not suffice to remove the objectionable marks. The chamber itself Michael proposed converting into a

cheese-room ; the apartment beneath, from its proximity to the kitchen, he would use as a general household room ; and serving maids might occupy the chambers over the kitchens, the men servants the attics above all. The lower rooms of the corresponding wing would be required for dairy, press-room, &c. ; brewing, washing, and other domestic matters, might be carried on in the out-buildings abutting on the central block, beneath the stained window of the staircase ; while the upper portion of the right wing should be set apart as store-rooms and bed-chambers, for his own family or their guests. The ancient drawing-room Michael determined to furnish elegantly and modishly, to destroy as far as possible all connection with the past, and gratify at once his wife and daughter. The small rooms beneath, opening from the entrance-hall, he planned as private rooms ; that on the left for himself, on the right for Alice ; nothing doubting that all these arrangements would meet the views of Margaret, who, it must be added, seldom if ever disputed his will, or expressed an opinion counter to his own.

While he was thus busied in fitting the building to his own requirements, for profit or the comfort of those connected with him, the astute builder, armed with an inch rule, pencil and pocket-book, measured floors and windows, made calculations, and jerked

from place to place, with a startling motion, something like a marionette.

The survey completed, from topmost attic to the very vaults and cellaring, the twain returned to their fire in the drawing-room, and ruefully surveyed the watery waste without. The day was far spent, but the storm was not: had every cloud contained the concentrated tears of a thousand Niobes they could not have been more lachrymose.

Neither cared to pass the night there, yet neither saw much prospect of tramping to Shotwick without being drenched to the skin, even through his riding-cloak, and neither had a change of raiment with him.

Mr. Peover thought of his rheumatism, shuddered, and fidgeted about the room very discontentedly.

Michael's adventure of Monday night flashed across his mind, but was as quickly dismissed, and he resigned himself to circumstances very stoically.

“What think you of my forethought now, Mr. Peover?” as they both commenced a fresh attack on the roast and boiled, asked Michael.

“Very sensible, very sensible, indeed! We should have had only a choice between famishing and drowning but for your precaution—fine thing to be weather-wise!”

“And a fine thing to be penny-wise, if not pound-foolish at the same time. Think of Sir Luke leaving this good house to go to ruin, and these fine pasture-

lands to run waste for a baby-fancy that would shame a schoolgirl. I mean to reclaim them, and make the good spirits of a united family chase all the evil spirits out of remembrance."

"Other tenants have tried that. I suppose you know that Sir Luke let it twice?" replied Mr. Peover.

"Yes; but would insist on leaving these two rooms intact, the old blockhead! as if closing a mystery up in two tabooed chambers was not enough in itself to create a ghost. *I* now, in clearing away the tracks of the tragedy, clear away all the mystery, and hope to clear the premises of all its ghostly tenants. By the way, let there be fresh and good locks on all the outer doors. I don't believe in ghosts, but I do believe in thieves. Some rogues broke into Ford-brook Farm about three years since, and made free with more than was pleasant; however, they did not get off scot-free; I always keep my pistols loaded with small shot, and I know I gave one rascal a peppering as he crossed the stile."

"Did you see their faces?"

"No; but one of them left his tools behind, and they were branded J.P. Country justices and constables strove to trace the owner, but I grew weary of the cost of their fruitless labour, and abandoned the pursuit. I kept the tools, however, and some day may show them to you."

Mr. Peover sat with his back to the light, his elbow on the table, and his head on his hand, during this conversation, so that Michael failed to observe the pallor on the old man's brow, or the faintness which had seized him for the second time that afternoon, but seeing that he was not pursuing his meal pressed him to eat. Mechanically yet nervously he poured out a horn of wine, and swallowed it at a gulp, then resumed his neglected knife and fork, which, however, rattled on his plate like castanets.

"Dear me, how you shiver! perhaps the draught from those broken panes annoys you. Come on this side, Mr. Peover, I am younger and stronger than you," said Michael, kindly. "I ought to have remembered your rheumatism. Finished, have you? 'Tis a pity eating and drinking should come to an end, when there is nothing else to do; enforced leisure lays so heavily!" continued he, walking to the window with his hands behind him as he spoke. "Not much chance of our quitting our quarters to-night!" added he, resuming his seat, as the mutterings of distant thunder broke on the ear. "I hope they will take care of our horses, those ostlers are such knavish dogs. I should have a lamp somewhere; oh, here it is! I'll light it, close the shutters, have a pipe, and try to make myself at home. Home! I wonder what they are doing there!"

During this dropping fire of desultory exclamations,

Michael had been moving about, clearing away the remnants of the rude supper, lighting the lamp, closing the shutters, and had been down-stairs to secure the outer doors. But Mr. Peover had never replied: he sat abstractedly gazing at the embers of the wood fire, as though wrapt in contemplation. Michael moving about had not noted his unwonted silence, but sitting down to his pipe the changed manner of his companion attracted his attention.

"Come, Mr. Peover, do not give way to dulness, because you are shut up in an empty house for the night. There are worse shelters than this in the world, and many a hapless wretch exposed to the storm without a shelter. Let us be thankful, not discontented, at our lot."

"I am not discontented. I wish every poor creature was as well housed; but I feel unusually depressed—ill, in fact, ill. I shall be better soon. No, thank you, I don't smoke—don't smoke."

Michael puffed away in silence, sipping his wine occasionally. Suddenly he drew his pistols forth from a pouch-pocket in his riding-cloak, laid them on the table, and returned to his pipe.

Mr. Peover grew more conversational; but the rattle of the thunder over head soon awed the pair into comparative silence. Meanwhile the night wore away; Michael persuaded Mr. Peover to make a pillow of one cloak, a coverlet of the other, and go to sleep

with his head on the table. For himself, he resolved to remain awake and watch, though he kept his resolve to himself, lest he should further disturb his excitable acquaintance.

But resolves are easier made than kept, and the heavy breathing of the one, and the heavier breathing of the other, proved the influence of the sharp ride, the sharper air, the heavy supper, warm fire, and dimly-lighted room. Both were asleep. Michael moved and muttered as the thunder peals shook the pile, but dozed off again. Suddenly a gust of wind rattled the shutters as though demon hands were striving to wrench and beat them in, and, like the discharge of a platoon of musketry, the thunder burst in one tremendous crash.

Both men started to their feet and looked around, half-expecting the walls to tumble about their ears ; but no catastrophe of the kind following, they sat down and talked about thunder-storms, Franklin, electricity, and other matters connected therewith, Michael mechanically looking at his huge watch the while. It wanted a few minutes to twelve. Replacing his watch in the fob, he laid one hand on the lamp, the other on a pistol, and sat expectant, Mr. Peover regarding him with wonder, and himself scarce conscious of the action or the spring that moved him. Presently a prolonged wail, that was not the wind, swept the corridor, and light steps hurried past. Michael opened

the door and darted out in time to see the luminous Grey Lady pass down the corridor into the haunted chamber. Quick as thought he fired—there was a heavy fall; but, when the smoke cleared away and he rushed forward, there was nothing to be seen—no body—no fresh blood-stains.

Michael hurried back to the room where Mr. Peover sat appalled. He was awed in spite of himself; yet such was the indomitable nature of the man, only the more doggedly resolved to fathom the mystery, if it were capable of elucidation. To Mr. Peover he then confided what he had seen, as also his former adventure, and his determination to exorcise the ghost, whether natural or supernatural. He “did not mean to be frightened out of a valuable estate by a shadow.”

Morning broke clear and fine; the few birds which had not followed the summer were singing in the branches, rain-drops sparkled and glistened like diamonds in the daylight, and everything seemed brighter and fresher for the storm.

The gentlemen hastened to Shotwick regardless of the miry roads, breakfasted, and returned to Chester, the one to hear his foreman’s report of business in general, and to pick out men for the House work, the other to collect his belongings at the Blue Posts and then return home to Northwich, his presence not being necessary for three or four weeks, at least so said Mr. Peover.

Second thoughts induced Mr. Ford to remain until the morrow, in order to receive and overlook the contractor's estimate; for, though he seemed a straightforward man enough, yet Michael argued to himself he had no voucher for his integrity save the word of a Latham; and though not generally inclined to be prejudiced, he certainly had a sort of repugnance to the very name of Latham. "The young fellow who bore it was good-looking enough, frank, and gentleman-like, not obtrusive; yet he was a Latham."

Had Michael argued that exactness was essential in all business transactions, he would have been only just; or had his self-communings arisen from a natural wariness in his dealings with strangers, no objection could be raised; but Michael was the reverse of this. His actions were not the result of deliberation, but decision—not of reflection, but perception; and though, as may be seen, he esteemed himself unprejudiced, and on the whole was; yet he was seldom known to relinquish an object on which he had decided, or abandon a prejudice or predilection once formed.

Accordingly, he acquainted Mr. Peover with his altered intentions as an "omission" to be rectified, and desired that the estimates might be supplied to him the following morning early, feeling anxious to reach Northwich before nightfall, Saturday afternoon,

more than any other in the week, requiring his presence at home.

Mr. Peover replied it would be close work, but he should be accommodated if possible.

The morning was far advanced when these arrangements were completed ; but Michael, not caring to waste the hour before dinner, strolled out in quest of a cabinet-maker ; not that there was any necessity for immediate haste, but people then were slow to move, and if he gave his orders early, there would be more time to complete the furniture ; and he was particularly desirous to have the drawing-room fitted up as a surprise for his wife and daughter, whom he loved dearly.

He had previously taken the precaution to make inquiries from the host, and also from a gentleman he had seen several times in the commercial room, respecting the most likely individual to serve him well, and as both concurred in naming the same tradesman, accepted the offer of the latter to introduce him, considering that offer a simple act of courtesy to a stranger. For once in his life Michael Ford's discernment was at fault.

This obliging young gentleman had represented himself, and seemed to be known, as the junior partner in the firm of Cardwell and Heywood, silkmen and general mercers, of Meal Street, Manchester, remaining beyond the stated period of the Michaelmas fair

in order to collect a few outstanding accounts in Chester and the neighbourhood, with more leisure on his hands than as a business man he cared for ; and, therefore, " it would be a relief to him rather than an inconvenience to act as Mr. Ford's guide that morning."

As this statement of position, business, and so on, had dropped out bit by bit, without apparent design, in the course of casual conversation during the week, a doubt of its verity never crossed the mind of Michael, who had somehow been attracted by the suave and almost deferential manners of the Manchester rider or bagman, as commercial travellers were then designated. So the pair left the inn arm-in-arm on their way to the cabinet-maker's in Foregate Street, and while Michael was busied inspecting chairs and tables, designs for bureaus, sofas, work-tables, et cetera, et cetera ; or turning over patterns of damask or carpeting, it might be as well to look a little more closely at his companion.

Not tall, as he stood beside the lofty figure of Michael, yet standing aloof, his slight frame gave to him the appearance of greater height than his actual measurement would justify ; and the casual observer, in all probability, would have pronounced him tall. His eyes were grey and glittering, forehead and teeth white and shapely, nose and lips delicately cut as those of a beautiful woman ; yet there was an un-

definable expression about the whole which at once needed and defied interpretation. As he wore a periwig, the hue of his natural hair could only be determined by his eyelashes and long thin lines of eyebrow, both dark and silky. In fact he was what is generally called a handsome man. But whether it was that his upper lip was a trifle too long, or his eyebrows a little too close, or his eyes glittered more than was pleasant, there was certainly an expression in his face beyond ordinary analysis.

In dress he was as much the dandy as a business man could presume to be ; he wore a closely fitting coat of bright blue cloth of superfine texture, trimmed with frog-buttons and embroidery of the same shade ; it had a short wide skirt reaching only to the hips ; his embroidered vest of lustrous French satin came little below the waist ; and his lighter blue breeches buttoning to fit the knee, were finished below the buttons with enormous bunches of ribbon strings. Extremely fine black worsted hose, with crimson silk clocks, and silver-buckled high heeled-shoes, clothed his lower limbs ; above his wrists, falling over delicate hands, were ruffles of rich lace ; lace also edged the falling ends of his cravat ; while the bosom of his shirt was frilled with transparent French cambric, kept in place by a dainty diamond pin. A gold-headed cane (concealing a sword), a finger-ring or two, and a jaunty three-cornered hat, made up the

exterior of the fashionable yet not over-dressed Manchester manufacturer, whose age, at a rough guess, was thirty—more or less—as lawyers say.

Having made such purchases and given such orders as he deemed desirable, Michael and Mr. Heywood returned to the Blue Posts and dined together. After dinner, having nothing better to occupy the hours than the week-old *Courant* or *Chronicle*, and the small sheet of the soon-exhausted *Times*, Michael proposed a walk upon the ancient walls, and the younger man assented with alacrity. This filled up the day, and so agreeably, that when at five o'clock Mr. Heywood left Mr. Ford at the door of the inn to keep (as he said) a business appointment with a customer, the latter found himself regretting the departure of his new acquaintance; and at an early hour retired to rest.

If all Mr. Heywood's customers resembled the one he met at the Yacht Inn, he must have driven a peculiar trade, for this was about the oddest looking mercer who ever stood behind a counter. Not that his garb was unsuitable, it was quiet and tradesman-like; but seemed to sit uneasily upon him. His face was shrewd and keen enough for a close dealer, but lacked the persuasive element so necessary in a retail trade, so conspicuous in Mr. Heywood; his hands, too, appeared rough to handle delicate wares; yet much of their conversation was of silks and satins,

lawn and lace, and other valuable commodities. Besides, there occurred a part of the transaction in which money and payment were frequently named, so it may be presumed this was only one of those singular *customers* tradesmen have to deal with at times.

## CHAPTER IV.

## AN ENCOUNTER IN THE FOREST.

AFTER an hour or two spent the next morning in the examination and signature of contracts and agreements with Mr. Peover in his close office, Michael started homewards, shaking hands with Mr. Heywood (also equipped for a journey) at the door of the Blue Posts, and expressing a hope to meet him again during his stay next Chester Fair, as he bade him farewell.

Turning sharp round to the right from Mercer's Row, he trotted Tony along Eastgate Street, and passed under the modern and expansive Eastgate newly erected by the spirit of improvement (?) at the cost of the demolition of the ancient structure with its beautiful Gothic archway, massive octagonal towers, rising story above story—itself an improvement (?) on the Roman gate, of which a portion yet remains—a silent protest against the vandalism which removes the ancient landmarks of a nation. From

the shadow of its wide arch he emerged into Foregate Street, once the great highroad of a great people—the Watling Street of the Romans ; but unconscious or unmindful of these successive and prophetic changes, he rode steadily on through Boughton, and crossed the canal bridge to Christleton, with a strange confusion in his mind of home, the Grange, Mr. Peover, and Mr. Heywood—a sort of kaleidoscope motley.

Not one of those who hurry on at first only to lag at last, he suffered Tony to pick his way as pleased him best ; and the well-used animal did not abuse the trust, but trotted on over the uneven turnpike road, without a stumble, and with more real than apparent haste, as the fast receding milestones testified. Six of these ancient distance chroniclers had been passed when he reached Tarvin. Here he stopped and drank a glass of ale without dismounting, for the day was dry and dusty. Beyond this, a mile, lay the village of Kelsall, and here, at a mean little roadside hostel, he alighted and called for refreshments.

It was long past noon, but there was a savoury odour of ham and eggs, providing for some countrymen with shock heads and smock frocks, who eyed the traveller narrowly as he entered the one common room, and roughly said he was welcome to share their dinner, if not too proud. He was *not* too proud, know-

ing there was no other chance of a nearer dinner than Sandiway, eight miles further on, and with Delamere forest to cross, he did not care to wait whilst a fresh relay of ham and eggs was cooked for himself. So he ate the savoury country fare, and drank ale with these rude clowns, and paid the reckoning from a tolerably well-filled purse, when he had done. Glances were exchanged by the three countrymen as he put up his purse, and one who had been absent from the room a little while nodded assentingly to his comrades on his return.

Unobservant of these side looks, Michael mounted and jogged forward, occasionally patting Tony's neck with a word of well understood encouragement, equally oblivious of the men he had left behind, or the road which lay before him. He was then in the heart of the forest passing "Ridley Pool," and nearing "Headless Cross," musing over the old stories connected with the forest, and the Cholmondley family ; over Nixon and his prophecies, wondering if Ridley Pool would be "sown and mown" in his day, and pondering how many years must elapse before "Headless Cross should sink so low that a crow perched a-top could drink the best blood of England!" It had sunk considerably within his own recollection !

Occupied with these reflections, he had not noticed the sharp click-click which followed Tony's steps, and indicated a loosening shoe. But as the click-click

became louder it attracted his attention, and annoyed him considerably. There was not a forge nearer than Northwich, and long before they reached the town the shoe would be off, and the poor beast lamed. There was no help for it ; to go back was worse than to go forward. However, he dismounted to examine the shoe, and try if he could hammer back the loosened nails with the butt of his pistol. To his surprise, not one, but all the nails were loose, and several missing ; yet he was certain from his own examination that the shoes were all right when he left Chester.

"The merciful man is merciful to his beast!" Michael compassionating Tony's feet and probable lameness, made no attempt to remount ; but, with the bridle over his arm, walked by his head, rather than add, by his weight, to the animal's inconvenience, which increased with every few steps.

Want of patience to endure the inevitable was not to be entered in the category of Michael's shortcomings ; albeit a somewhat passionate man. Many men in his situation would have chafed and fumed at this unlooked-for impediment to progress, venting their spleen in those oaths and imprecations with which our English language was then so plentifully garnished. But Michael preferred his native tongue, without the piquant sauce of blasphemy ; and so (with the exception of an occasional "by jingo")

expended little useless energy that way ; but he shook his head ruefully as he surveyed the prospect before him ; and as a thought glanced across his mind that some malicious wight had drawn the nails, set his teeth, knit his brows, and clenched his right hand very significantly.

It was Saturday, the day on which he paid his field labourers ; men whose families could not afford to wait for the bread-winner's wages ; and he was apprehensive lest his wife should leave them unpaid, rather than take the office of cashier into her own hands ; at least he knew she would be perplexed how to act or think for herself. Then he had written to announce his return that afternoon *early*, and here he was, on a strip of rutty, rugged road, called by courtesy, a highway, in the midst of a dense forest, with a worse than shoeless horse, nine good miles before him still, and the afternoon far spent.

A walk of nine miles on an autumnal evening, along a country road, may not, at first sight, appear very formidable, to a man of Michael's muscular frame, especially ; or along a well lighted thoroughfare, with a plentiful sprinkling of police here and there ; but lamps were not a luxury for Delamere forest ; the mounted patrol was not organized ; and if garrotting was not in fashion, certainly highway robbery was.

So that when Michael kept a pistol in his hand as he strode manfully along, he took no unnecessary pre-

caution ; and when he glanced upwards to measure the daylight between the over-arching trees, it was with the calculation of prudence—not pusillanimity. Two miles had been traversed thus ; poor Tony's click-click, click-click, beating time to his master's thoughts, when, on reaching a spot where the road narrowed, and the underwood was unusually dark and dense, a movement in the bushes arrested his attention.

Ere he could turn to ascertain whence the sound proceeded, the three smock-frocked fellows with whom he had dined, sprang upon him from the thicket, the foremost aiming a blow at him with a thick ashen cudgel.

Michael swerved aside, instantly aiming at the fellow's head with his ready pistol, and the blow intended for the traveller came down on Tony with a force which caused the animal to start and plunge ; while the pistol, on which his master relied, missed fire ; but with the heavy riding-whip he struck the man across the face, a left-handed blow, which sent him reeling.

But the odds were three to one ; besides, Michael was hampered with his cloak, and the bridle over his left arm ; and as that was jerked to and fro in the struggle, the horse reared and plunged wildly, threatening, as he kicked, to be a formidable antagonist alike to friends and foes. In a twinkling, one of

the men drew a knife through the leather, and freed the frantic beast, giving him, at the same time, a sharp prick with the blade. This sent him darting along the road, mad with pain and excitement, at a furious speed ; the click of his loosened shoes dying out in the rapidly increasing distance.

Meanwhile the desperate strife between Michael and his dastardly assailants continued. All three were armed with stout sticks ; one likewise wielded a knife, such as sailors use, whilst he had no better weapon for his defence than his silver-mounted whip, Tony having carried off his second pistol.

Notwithstanding his muscular frame, and ready arm, or the dexterity with which he parried or returned their blows, a contest so unequal could not long continue ; the struggle was fierce while it lasted ; but one stout man was no match for three as strong, and at length, felled by a ruffianly blow from behind, Michael was borne to the ground, partially stunned, faint, and bleeding. His hands were cut, there was a deep wound in his arm, and bruises on head, and face, and body. Nor were his opponents unscathed ; the silver head of his whip had left its mark on more than one face, ere it was wrested from his hand as he fell.

From a temporary swoon he recovered to find one of the ruffians rifling his pockets, another held him down, and the third stood aloof, looking and listening down the road. Unresistingly he saw his watch and

purse transferred to the robbers' wallet ; but feeble as he was, struggled manfully to preserve an antique ring, which had been his father's and grandfather's. At length the threat to cut it off, and the finger with it, caused him most reluctantly to relinquish his clasp of the jewel, prized as it was.

During the noise and confusion of the struggle, Michael's eyes and ears had been too pre-occupied in self-defence to note anything beyond the group with whom he contended ; but now, active resistance over, pinned down with his ears close to the ground, he thankfully distinguished the close and rapid beat of horses' hoofs—not Tony's, though there were more than one ; the steps were too firm and regular ; there was no click-click, boding loss to man and beast.

Apparently the robbers heard it also, for, in the midst of a dispute on the necessity for despatching the wounded man, to ensure his silence, they suddenly started to their feet, and giving their victim a final kick darted off with their booty, and disappeared in the depths of the forest, just as two horses and a solitary rider came at full speed down upon them, and the least nimble of the desperadoes felt the horseman's whip about his shoulders ere he dived into the brushwood.

But a man can pass where a horse and man cannot, so the thieves escaped, and the new-comer dismounted to assist the fallen man to rise. Michael's surprise

was only exceeded by his pleasure, when he looked up and beheld, bending over him, the undefinable face of Mr. Heywood, full of regret and sympathy—and something more, which Michael could not see.

"I trust you are not seriously wounded, Mr. Ford. How very unfortunate I was not in time to protect you! Do let me help you to rise; the trunk of this fallen tree will serve for a seat whilst I see what can be done for you," As he said this with gentle and compassionate tones, he assisted Mr. Ford from the ground to the tree, so conveniently felled, and proceeded to bind his arm and hands with silk handkerchiefs, taken from unfathomable pockets, saying, as he did so: "This may suffice until we reach Sandiway; I have some little skill in binding flesh-wounds (how acquired, he did not say), and, may prove, my dear sir, a pretty fair substitute for a surgeon, when I have light enough to examine the nature of your injuries. The shadows deepen so fast I could not see to do more here, even were it safe to loiter. Those vagabonds may return, and as I have valuable goods in my possession, I do not care to risk an unnecessary encounter. Perhaps a draught of this cordial may revive you," continued he, diving once more into the unfathomable pocket for a small flask, which he offered with the words: "It is genuine French brandy, I assure you."

Genuine French brandy it was; and its restorative

effects were soon apparent. As he returned the flask, Michael said, "How shall I thank you, Mr. Heywood? I am greatly in your debt! You did not come up one moment too soon; that great black-muzzled fellow, kneeling on my chest, was fast suffocating me; I have hardly recovered my voice and breath yet. However shall I get home, now Tony is gone, and myself in this plight," continued he in an under-tone of self-communion.

"My horse is at your service, Mr. Ford; I shall be proud to resign him to your use; I am but a light weight, and this pack not so heavy as usual, so I can ride with my goods without overburdening the animal," said Mr. Heywood, readily.

"Really, Mr. Heywood, your kindness——"

"Nay, no thanks!" interrupted that gentleman, blandly, "this is but an act of common humanity; courtesy is out of the question. But let me assist you to mount. There! he has not a very hard mouth, and so I trust the reins will not gall your hands through the wrappings."

"Thank you, my hands are pretty well protected. I shall manage very well."

"We will lose no time then," said Mr. Heywood, laying his hand on the pack of the led horse, and vaulting lightly upon it, as though that had been a saddle.

All this passed in little more time than has been

occupied in the narration, and the two rode on together, very slowly at first, for Michael's head still felt dizzy from the fall, and loss of blood.

They soon gained the cross roads about a mile from Sandiway, and there, to Michael's surprise, Tony was grazing on the road-side grass, secured by the longer end of the cut bridle to the finger-post, which pointed out with long gaunt arms the road they had been traversing as the one "To Chester," that in continuation "To Northwich," while those at right angles indicated southward the road to Tarporley, northward to Waverham, whenever daylight left the inscription legible. By this time Michael's head was less confused and his perceptions clearer, so that, finding Tony tethered called to his remembrance the strange circumstance that Mr. Heywood had come galloping to his rescue from that quarter. This was a puzzle to him. He could have understood that a well-horsed, lightly-built man should have overtaken him in his delayed movements, but that he should *meet* him, as it were, was, to say the least, incomprehensible; and so he told Mr. Heywood as they released the horse and journeyed onwards.

"I thought," answered he, with a pleasant, but at the same time a very peculiar smile, "I had told you I had business in Tarporley to-day."

"I don't remember it, if you did," replied Michael.

"It may have escaped your memory. However, I

left the inn immediately after yourself, the customer for whose account I waited walked up as you rode away. His money received, I had no inducement to prolong my stay when brief but important business called me elsewhere. My horses and pack had been ready some time, so I mounted on the instant, thinking to join you long before you reached Tarvin, where the road branches off. Your few minutes' start, however, gave you an advantage, and I turned off to Tarporley without catching a glimpse of you."

"But Tarporley is some distance. I am at a loss to comprehend yet," mused Mr. Ford, with a perplexed air.

"Indeed! the thing is simple enough," replied Mr. Heywood, with a slight elevation of his shoulders and eyebrows. "As I said before, my business at Tarporley, though important, was very brief; and I pushed on, as desirous to reach a good inn before nightfall as you were to get home. (Yes, turning off into the horse-road at Christleton, through Duddon and Colebrook, keeping wide enough of Tarporley.) As I gained those cross-roads, your riderless horse rushed up; alarmed, I caught the flying rein, and tying the strap roughly to the post, hurried down the Chester road to ascertain what accident had befallen you. No suspicion of highway robbery occurred to me. I knew you to be as well armed as mounted, and no firing had reached my ears. I spurred my

horse as your cry of "Murder" rose on the wind, and am only thankful that the brief nature of my engagement enabled me to reach you when I did."

"I too am thankful! your arrival was most opportune!" exclaimed Michael, in hearty response to Mr. Heywood's plausible, but very equivocal explanation.

"It was the merest chance," continued this friend-in-need, "the very merest chance. One moment later or earlier, and your runaway horse would have been either before or behind me; as it was, we met by one of those unforeseen accidents so common in life, on which depends so much."

"There are no such things as accidents!" rose to Mr. Ford's lips, in unconscious echo of Mr. Peover's words.

"Ah, well, perhaps not!" and Mr. Heywood shrugged his shoulders, and raised his eye-brows just a little; "But may I ask how it was that your good horse had not carried you beyond the limits of the forest? *I* had made, from Tarvin," a circuit of well nigh double the length of your road. Had you loitered anywhere?" asked Mr. Heywood, curiously, without a word of the speed he had himself kept, or the peculiar route he had taken.

"Unfortunately, yes!" was Michael's reply. "At Kelsall I got down, and joined some seeming countrymen at their repast of ham and eggs. The half-hour

so occupied by me, was, it appears, spent by one of them in drawing the nails from poor Tony's shoes, and, I perceive, the charge from my pistols," handing, as he spoke, the undischarged one to Mr. Heywood. "I had incautiously left them in the holsters. I remember now that black-looking scoundrel left the room whilst I was too busy eating to care what such clodhoppers were doing. It will teach me caution in future!"

"Well, and what then?" asked the younger man, with much apparent interest.

"What then? Listen! do you hear the click-click of poor Tony's shoes? I see you do. Well, I heard it; not at first, but when I was too far in the forest to turn back (the rascals had calculated time and distance cleverly). I got down, found two shoes half off, and resolved to walk. The bridle was over my arm when the villains made the attack, but I think the man who wounded me must have set him loose."

"You have had a very narrow escape. I hope the rogues have not plundered you."

"Not plundered me! indeed, but they have! All my loose cash, my watch, and a ring once my father's are in their hands, and I hope will help some day to hang the ruffians."

There was a peculiar glitter in the manufacturer's grey eyes, and a touch of sarcasm in his tone as he

replied. "That is not very likely ; country constables are neither quick witted nor quick footed, and foot-pads are generally both ; so I fear you will have to resign yourself to the loss. But here we are at Sandiway, my dear sir. You will find the 'Blue Cap' a fair specimen of a rustic wayside public-house, as I, travelling the road so often, have reason to know, and here, if you please, I will look to your hurts before we proceed further. Besides, I have had no better dinner than a crust of bread and cheese, and must plead guilty to a sharp appetite." So saying, he led the way into the clean sanded room of the little hostel, and ordering such edibles as the place afforded, proceeded at once to divest Michael of his upper garments, and examine the injured arm and hands.

From a pocket-book he produced scissors and plaister, saying, that he "always carried them to be prepared for emergencies"—though what emergencies a peaceful tradesman needed to prepare for did not appear—unless the unsettled state of the roads provided a reason. Cutting the plaister into little strips, with much tenderness and some skill he drew the edges of the wound together, strapping the bits of plaister over as dexterously as though he had graduated as a hospital dresser. As most of the cuts in the hands were mere scratches, none dangerous, and no tendon or main artery had been severed in his

arm, though it had bled profusely, and was stabbed completely through the fleshy part, Mr. Heywood's amateur surgery was likely to prove all that was needful : and Michael felt and expressed a deep sense of obligation to him, not with lavish words which mean little, but with few and earnest ones, while his timely assistant, with much less sincerity, protested, that as “he arrived too late for the fray, he had little right to be thanked.” Much less indeed than Michael dreamed.

The time devoted by Mr. Heywood to the refreshment of his inner man, was quite as necessary to recruit Michael Ford. No matter how stalwart his frame, a prolonged struggle with three powerful desperadoes, armed with knife and cudgels, in which these playthings were freely used, was not calculated to leave him as strong and fresh as though it had been a game of football on a common, or even a fair fight.

Unpretending as the small public-house appeared, the landlord brought forth for his departing guests some excellent Hollands, which had evidently lost none of its strength or purity by paying compliments to the excise laws ; and this served Michael in good stead. The evening shadows had deepened, and the stars began to peep out of the sky as they travelled unmolested along the road to Northwich. Here Mr. Heywood would have bade Michael farewell, but that

was not to be thought of, Michael insisting that he should make Ford-brook farm his home so long as his business kept him in the neighbourhood.

"But will Mrs. Ford be agreeable to the entrance of a stranger at this late hour? I do not doubt her hospitality any more than yours, but what will she think of me for taking advantage of it?"

"Think! she will of course think just what I think, I never knew her to do otherwise. Alice (that's my daughter) to be sure, has a will of her own; but as for Margaret, I never heard her say 'no' to anything I proposed, not even when I asked her to leave her old uncle and be my wife: and a capital one she's been too, always as quiet as a mouse, yet as busy as a bee," and Michael's voice seemed to warm as he contemplated his wife's many excellencies. "Besides," continued he, with a smile, "I am rather too stiff to dismount and walk home; and, as I must borrow your horse a little longer, it is only fair that you should assure yourself, by your presence, that he is well used, and not turned adrift when I've done with him. No, no, Mr. Heywood; if I suffered the man who has been the means of saving my life to take his chance at an inn whilst I went to a comfortable home, I should deserve to be killed outright the first time I crossed the forest again."

"Well, well, since you are so persistent, I must comply. Remember, I exonerate myself of any

desire to intrude upon the ladies," was Mr. Heywood's reply, attended by a courteously compliant inclination of the head.

And so it came about, that Robert Heywood attained his soul's desire—an introduction, under promising auspices, at Ford-brook farm.

As they rode through the High Street, Michael left his limping steed in charge of the ostler at the Crown, with instructions to take him to a farrier next day. Then the two hastened onwards, keeping the high road for about a mile, when they turned abruptly into a by road, one of those green lanes so peculiar to England's sylvan scenery. The sandy roadway, stretched like a broad drab ribbon over a green velvet robe, so soft and verdant was the turf beyond on either side, sprinkled close beneath the tall hedges with an embroidery of wildling flowers. Here and there the rudely torn-down hazel boughs or bramble bushes told of mischief done by whooping boys scrambling for nuts and blackberries or searching eagerly for birds' nests. A shallow brooklet skirting the roadside path murmured over a bed of pebbles, and made gentle music in the ears of lovers loitering past on sunmer or autumnal eves. It swept its tributary waters on to a broader and still shallower stream crossing the road, and which the horses had to splash through. There were stepping-stones for foot passengers on one side, and as the stream seldom or

never rose above them, few of the country people ever felt the inconvenience of the watery interruption to a dry-shod walk: About a hundred yards beyond, in an angle of the road, stood the farm—a long, low, straggling whitewashed house, with a number of darker buildings shrouded amongst heavy trees in the rear. Trailing plants climbed over the trellised porch, and a large rose-tree late in summer struggled with a dark-leaved jessamine which should bring its perfumed offering closest to the chamber windows. The house itself stood back from the road, with a frontage of well-kept garden ground ; into this a wide gate opened for the admission of horsemen or light vehicles, whilst a stile, like a double ladder with a handrail, served for pedestrians, to step from the road upon a firm gravel path, so well raised in the middle, it was never sloppy in the wettest of weather. Extensive meadows spread their daisied carpets behind the house and on each side, while over the road a heavy wooden gate opened into corn-fields as extensive, owning the same master.

Little or nothing of this was visible to our travellers that night. Mr. Heywood might have heard the low song of the brook, but his was not a musical ear. He caught the glimmer of the moonlight on the wider stream as they drew near, and heard the plashing waters washing his horse's fetlocks, but no sense of the calm beauty of the scene crossed his abstracted mind,

nor, had daylight shone upon the picture, would it have impressed him more ; he was musing on his merchandise, and a new speculation connected therewith, and was only roused from his reverie by Michael's hearty exclamation, "Thank God ! we are at home."

## CHAPTER V.

## AT HOME.

YES, home! Proclaimed by the door thrown hastily open before the wayfarers can reach it, by the white arms flung lovingly round the father's neck, ere his feet fairly touch the step; the demonstrative owner of the clasping arms and kissing mouth standing on tip-toe to touch the lips bent down to meet hers. By the shy yet pleased glance of the quiet matron at the stranger standing by, while she too, as fondly but more calmly, embraced the husband, who was all the world to her, telling that he was indeed at "home," and might well "thank God" for it. Michael too, with one arm round each of his dear ones, seemed for a long time forgetful of everything but their presence and welcomes; forgetful even of pain, or hospitality, or gratitude. But Love is lord-paramount in homes like this, and Michael's first duty was due to the home-deity.

Not long, however, did he forget the friend who

stood there unannounced, but as soon as the first shower of kisses ceased, begged wife and daughter both to welcome Mr. Heywood, as one who had saved him from imminent peril. The colour faded from both female faces at the bare suggestion of danger to one so dear, even though the danger was past, and flushed back again with their thanks to Mr. Heywood, for an action so vaguely proclaimed, and the merit of which he as vaguely disclaimed.

All these congratulations had taken place in the narrow hall, with the outer door wide open; but a farming man with a lantern having come round from some remote region to lead away the horses, he deposited the pack and saddle-bags on the floor of the hall and closed the door, as Mr. Ford led the way into a cheerful sitting-room of moderate dimensions, where a pleasant fire and ready-laid supper awaited them. Alice and her mother followed closely, anxious to learn the nature of the accident from which he had been preserved, the broad brim of his riding-hat having concealed his bruised and discoloured face from their first hurried glance in the dim hall. But Michael refused to satisfy their curiosity. “Supper first thing, Margaret!” said he, and passive Margaret turned away to attend to his wishes, as though feeling and curiosity had no place in her breast, saying as she left the room, in as much of a bustle as she could feel, and that was not much: “Now Alice help

your father off with his hat and cloak while I draw the ale ; I dare say Peggy's asleep."

" Gently, child, gently !" exclaimed Michael, as Alice hurried to obey her mother with no more ceremony than usual. " Gent—ly ! I have been in the wars, and come back wounded, you must not be rough ; you squeezed me a little too closely in the hall just now."

As he spoke the fair girl's eye glanced quickly from her father's blackened face to his plastered hands, the cut and bloody sleeve, and with the exclamation, " Wounded, oh father !" she fell back fainting into a chair close at hand. Mr. Heywood darted forward to support her as she fell ; Mrs. Ford and Peggy entered at the moment with their hands full, yet though greatly distressed at the sight of her husband's evident injuries, and her daughter's unwonted situation, her presence of mind never forsook her, and she proceeded to bathe Alice's palms and brow with vinegar, and sprinkle cold water in her face until she revived, and Mr. Heywood had no longer an excuse to clasp the form he then relinquished, with a reluctance of which they could have no suspicion.

" You silly baby," said her father, when, according to Peggy, 'the wench had come round,' " did you never see blood or a plaster before, that you should faint at the sight of them now ?"

" Why, Michael, husband ! where have you been,

or what have you been doing, to come home in that condition? The poor girl might well be scared out of her senses. I have gone quite sick myself with dread," said Mrs. Ford, with more emotion than she had hitherto displayed.

"I'll tell you after supper; don't look so frightened, Margaret. Thanks to Mr. Heywood, I am not quite killed this time. Come Alice, love, rouse; kiss me; there, all's right now, sit down. Mr. Heywood, will you have the goodness to take my place? These scratches prevent my handling a carving-knife and fork. The reins chafed my hands sorely coming home."

Mr. Heywood was willing to do anything to oblige, and presided at the hospitable board with the ease of an old friend of the family, instead of an acquaintance an hour old. During the meal Mr. Ford detailed the afternoon's adventure, dwelling on the probability that the robbers would have murdered him but for Mr. Heywood's timely arrival, and on the humanity and skill displayed in his subsequent attentions. Alice listened to the narration with white lips and eager yet perturbed countenance, and even Mrs. Ford seemed anxious and discomposed. Mr. Heywood was overwhelmed with profuse acknowledgments of the service he had rendered, thanks which he protested against with very diplomatic modesty, stammering forth something about having "no claim

on their gratitude," when Alice "wondered how they could possibly repay him?" But what was that in his furtive glance which caused the fair girl's eyelids to droop and cheek to flush?

Michael next ascertained that, as he feared, his men's wages were unpaid, his timid wife deprecating his evident displeasure by the assurance that if she had thought he would like her to pay them she would have done so; she had been quite concerned all the evening about it, not knowing what to do for the best, and begged him not to blame her.

"I don't exactly blame you, Margaret, but I've a notion the men and their families will; however, I can set it right in the morning."

"Father, you have not told us one word about the Grange," interposed Alice. "Is it very much altered?"

"Considering that I never saw it before, your question is rather a difficult one to answer; but it is very much dilapidated and weather-worn, and the grounds are one mass of weeds; those, I suppose, are alterations since your mother was there. How long is that since, eh, Margaret?"

"Let me see," replied Mrs. Ford, counting on her fingers as she spoke, "Alice is just eighteen, we had been married two years when she was born, that's twenty, and poor dear cousin Grenville was killed" (she did not say killed herself) "three years before that,

that's twenty-three, and I had not been to the Grange one, two, three years before, because uncle Luke was afraid lest her reprobate husband should make love to me, as he did to every girl he met, and that's twenty-six years—full twenty-six years since I saw the dear old Grange."

Michael, turning to his guest, said, "Have you in your journeyings seen or heard of Grenville Grange, Mr. Heywood? It is the reputed home of a veritable ghost, with a very respectable legend attached to it."

"I do not think I have; there is not much romance in my composition; ghost stories do not suit the counting-house, are not catalogued in our ledgers; and if I have heard the name, it must have slipped from my memory, or made no impression. May I ask in what direction lies this ghostly Grange?"

"Between Chester and Parkgate, about half-a-mile west of Shotwick, and considerably less than that distance from the river Dee; but unless you went up the river you would not observe the place, it lies so far away from the high-road. However, it has such a very questionable reputation, even in Chester, I thought it possible you might, amongst the gossips of the commercial room, have heard something of it."

"Nothing, I assure you. You have, I presume, an interest in the spot?"

"Yes, ownership. It is my wife's inheritance: a

very small portion of what she ought to have had, and doubtless would, if an old uncle of her's had not been henpecked when he made his will."

"Did you see the wonderful ghost, father? I want to know that," asked Alice, with a look of sly incredulity."

"Two, child; two as palpable ghosts as we ever shall see; and what is more, I shot them both. What do you think of that?" and Michael's knife-handle came down on the table with a startling rap.

Mrs. Ford looked round timidly, as if she half-expected to see the ghosts of the slain ghosts at her elbow; and Mr. Heywood, startled perhaps by the impromptu rap, tilted a quantity of pigeon-pie he was helping, on to the younger lady's dress. With a very red face, and the confusion of a bashful boy rather than the assurance of a bagman, he uttered some very unintelligible apologies, at which Alice could not avoid laughing good-humouredly, though she did in her own mind set him down as a "clumsy booby."

"Now, father, after this little digression, let us hear the last dying speech and confession of the ghost, or ghosts."

"Oh, Alice, how dare you?" faintly murmured her mother.

"Well, child, the first haunted the chimney, so, in answer to a squeal and a screech, I fired up it, and

down came the spectre—a nest of owls in a bushel of soot."

"Rather an unromantic termination of a ghost story," said Alice, laughing merrily.

"Not a grey ghost, but a black one," observed Mr. Heywood, lightly.

"Did *I* say the ghost was *grey*?" asked Mr. Ford, doubtingly; "I don't think I mentioned its colour."

Mr. Heywood looked very like a man who had made a mistake as he answered, "Perhaps you said the owls were grey, and I misunderstood you."

"But, husband," said Mrs. Ford, very calmly, "you told us you had shot *two* ghosts; what of the second?"

"Reach me my cloak, Alice; hold it up to the light—do you see anything?"

"Goodness! it is full of little holes—completely spoiled! But what has that to do with the ghost?" persisted Mrs. Ford.

"Simply that my cloak was spectre number two. I fell asleep, and wakened out of a dream, just wise enough to mistake my garment for a ghost, and spoil it accordingly with the contents of my second pistol."

Not one word of the luminous grey figure which had startled Michael twice, and been fired at once—not a syllable. Had Mr. Heywood been cognizant of the omission, his glittering eyes could not have held a more peculiar light than when he asked Mrs. Ford the simple question, "Do you believe in apparitions?"

"Why, yes—no—that is,—I think, I have not thought about it; Michael does not believe in them, and he must be right."

"Right, or not right, Margaret, I don't think it is right for us to sit at this table so long after the meal is over, or to keep our guest out of bed until midnight. I hope you ordered Peggy to prepare a room for our friend."

"Oh, the chintz room was ready long before you came home. Peggy took the warming-pan and aired the bed well this afternoon, for she insisted master would bring some one home with him, when she heard the old cock crow before the door, and was as certain some stranger would be here to supper, because she dropped a knife on the floor. You might see she had laid an extra knife and fork on the table."

"Well, if Peggy's superstition is always as sensible and useful, we shall not quarrel. I suppose she is in bed?" said Michael.

"Yes," answered Margaret, lighting a chamber-candle as she spoke. "If you will follow me, Mr. Heywood, I will show you to your room; your packages are already there."

Good-nights were exchanged: Mr. Heywood followed his hostess through curious passages and up occasional short flights of stairs, to a black door in an unsuspected corner, opening into a room sunk two steps beneath the landing. Here Mrs. Ford left

her guest with many good wishes for his night's repose.

He must have been a very morose and discontented mortal if he had not been satisfied with the comfortable chamber provided, prior to his arrival, for the stranger's accommodation, albeit there were no damask draperies with silken fringe, no luxurious lounges, or Turkey carpets yielding to the tread. The comfort was in something apart from the glitter of glass, gilding, and French polish : in the home aspect of the chamber, the extreme cleanliness and neatness of the whole, the suggestiveness of busy feminine fingers, of the ample resources of the farm, and general household industry. On the walls (stencilled in quiet colours, no doubt by home hands), hung odd copies of Hogarth's Idle Apprentice, and the Rake's Progress, in black frames ; the floor was partially covered with a carpet of scarlet and black cloth interwoven to form a check resembling the Rob Roy tartan, the uncovered boards being whitened with frequent scrubbings ; the seats of the high-backed chairs were covered with silken patchwork in fanciful devices ; the oaken wood-work of chairs, bureau, and triangular washstand, hone with the laborious lustre of bees'-wax and elbow-grease ; the fire grate, black and bright, was decorated with dried grasses ; the spider-legged toilet table had a snowy damask cover, on which rested a plump pin-cushion with the word "Welcome" knitted in the

pattern on its surface ; and on the bureau stood a vase of Derbyshire spar containing a nosegay of choice autumnal flowers. And nothing but sickness of mind or body could have prevented repose in that luxurious bed. Roomy, with long spindly posts reaching to the unceiled rafters, it was amply hung with printed linen (cotton was scarce and rare when that was bought), on which Arcadian shepherds and shepherdesses were depicted in many colours on a buff ground, amidst trees of impossible foliage (the transom window was draped to correspond), the sheets, temptingly white, and fragrant with lavender, were home-spun and bleached ; the coverlet was knitted of white woollen yarn, the produce of their own sheep ; geese, which had once been goslings on the farm, had supplied the feathers for the double beds and downy pillows, and some of the satisfaction visible in Mr. Heywood's face as he viewed it in the oval swing glass no doubt arose from the contemplation of his comfortable quarters.

In another nook of this irregular and impossible-to-describe dwelling was the chamber of Alice, near the low door of which her parents kissed, and bade her good-night. Ascending the three or four steps which led, as through a tunnel, to the apartment, she entered ; and we are privileged to follow, and make a brief survey. It was a room of peculiar construction, with more sides than one would care to count, no two

bearing the same proportions. The neatness and order which characterised Mr. Heywood's chamber pervaded this also, though in other respects somewhat dissimilar. The home-made carpets were of grey and blue cloth interspersed with list; there was a patchwork quilt upon the bed, which was hung with gingham woven in a distinct check of dark blue and white. On one wall was suspended a neat set of hanging shelves, containing her disused school-books, prizes, and others, such as Mrs. Chapone's Letters, Blair's Advice to Youth, the Poems of Pope, Cowper, and Addison, The Vicar of Wakefield, Paul and Virginia, The Art of Cookery, Miss Burney's Eveline, and universal Robinson Crusoe,—a well-used Bible and Prayer-book lay on the table. Beneath the book-shelves stood a large antique coffer of black oak, curiously carved; from this Alice took out the garments required for the morrow's wear, and laid them ready, ere she proceeded to disrobe.

Something might have occurred to discompose her, undressing seemed so tedious a process. She stood abstracted, with her boddice half unlaced, then dreamily divested herself of her attire, pausing as she folded each article, and finally, as she came before her small round dressing-glass to brush out her long chestnut hair, as yet unpolluted by powder, her vague thoughts assumed shape, and she stood with one hand clasped above the other, resting on

the toilet-table, seeing in the polished mirror not herself, but the handsome, undefinable face of Robert Heywood, courting her favour, reproaching her for ingratitude, yet repelling her in spite of herself.

There is a principle of attraction and repulsion in souls as well as bodies, and something of this was felt by Alice as she strove in vain with the shadowy distrust of her father's preserver, gradually obscuring her grateful feeling. One by one all the incidents of that eventful day as related by her father, all their supper-table gossip, passed in review before her. She pictured Mr. Heywood riding to the rescue, perchance to involve himself in a life-and-death struggle, binding up wounds, lending his horse, and timing his pace to that of an injured stranger, and every sense of honour and justice seemed to demand her heartfelt thanks for his promptitude and humanity. But something in his manner, or on his lip, or in his glittering eyes—what, she could not define—sealed down the warmer impulses of her heart with an impression of insincerity, and already, without a visible reason, she felt a growing distrust of the man, though thoroughly ashamed to own it, even to herself. As Alice laid her head upon her pillow with these thoughts and images floating in her mind, so did they mingle in her dreams, and cause her to move uneasily in her sleep.

When Mr. Heywood had threaded the labyrinth

of staircases and passages the next morning to the room in which he had supped, he found the family already assembled, and breakfast waiting. Notwithstanding his bruises, which Michael said had made him "as stiff as an old horse," he had been up and out more than an hour, paying the deferred wages, with a small gratuity in each case to compensate for the inconvenience of waiting.

He saluted Mr. Heywood with "Good morning, my young friend, you are not a very early riser, it seems: I suppose you keep Manchester time! We country people rise with the lark; Margaret and Ailsie here have been up for hours, busied in preparations for the wearied travellers (for I overslept myself), while Peggy and Betty were in the dairy sieving the milk as the men brought it from the shippions. The cows have been milked and driven to the meadows long ago. So you may be sure we want our breakfast. I am as hungry as a hunter, though I did despatch a bowl of fleetings\* before I went out.

"I hope you will not take my father's remarks otherwise than as they are meant, pleasantly; we never impose restrictions on the hours of our guests, Mr. Heywood," said Alice, interrupting his apology.

"I trust you slept well, sir; some persons cannot sleep in a strange bed," said Mrs. Ford.

\*A pleasant combination of warm curds and whey peculiar to cheese farms.

"Too well, I am afraid, witness my late appearance ; but the softness and fragrance of my couch, and the balmy country air are alone answerable for my indolence," replied he, taking his seat as he spoke.

Rich cream to blend with the aromatic coffee was in the china ewer ; there were wheat-cakes fresh from the bake-stone, on hot plates, bread both brown and white, sweet and pure butter fresh from the dairy, cream cheese of her daughter's making—so said Mrs. Ford—fresh-laid eggs, poultry of their own rearing, ham of their own feeding and curing ; and all on a damask cloth of unrivalled whiteness, the flax for which Alice had spun, as her mother boasted with pardonable pride.

"Ah, Mr. Heywood, our Alice will make a famous wife for somebody or other some day. She knows how to use her fingers, and is not too dainty to soil them either."

"Hush, father," said she, the warm blood mounting to her forehead, though why, it is strange to tell, since she had heard her father make the same remark scores of times before, without emotion. Had Mr. Heywood's presence anything to do with her change of colour ?

"Why should I 'hush,' child, it's true enough ; not that I care for the samplers and silk work and muslin work you tried your eyes over at school—they are all very well in their way—but give me the hands that can spin the yarn for a shirt, make the shirt, and wash

and iron it when it is made ; that can knit a stocking or darn one, milk a cow, or convert the cheese to milk and butter, bake the bread and brew the ale, make a cake or cook a dinner : and though she's but eighteen, Alice can do all that and more too, for she turns her writing and cyphering to account in keeping my books ; ay, and when her work is over, can cheer us with a merry tune upon the harpsichord, or dance a minuet with any girl in the county."

Alice had disappeared at the very commencement of this eulogium, and soon appeared at the door of the room, accompanied by her mother, both equipped for walking. "Come, father," said the former, "are you not ready ? we shall be late at church, the bells have begun to ring."

"I shall stay at home this morning, my dear, my limbs are too stiff and sore for the walk ; besides, my disfigured face might provoke our parson to wander from his text to some personal allusions anything but pleasant ; or, barring that, curiosity would destroy devotion in one-half of the congregation at least—which half, I dare not venture to say. Mr. Heywood will, doubtless, have no objection to take my place."

With a scarcely perceptible flush, reflected in the face of Alice, though proceeding from widely opposite causes, Mr. Heywood, bowing low, expressed the gratification he should "feel in being permitted to escort Miss Ford and her excellent mother."

The ladies curtsied in graceful acknowledgment of a compliment paid more in tones than words ; and, Mr. Heywood having obtained his jaunty triangular hat and tasselled cane, the trio passed down the gravelled path, over the wooden stile, down the lane, across the stepping-stones, and on to the hamlet of Witton, where Northwich old church had opened its doors for Sabbath worship. He had cast his riding slough of buckskin breeches, dark cutaway long-tailed coat, broad brimmed hat, and had come forth the butterfly Mr. Ford first beheld him in Chester, something between a Maccaroni beau and a wealthy tradesman ; and Mrs. Ford felt not a little proud of the staring admiration bestowed upon them by the rustics on the road to whom the gentleman was an unusual sight, fashions in those days coming very slowly down to country places remote from the capital.

Alice, either from the cause first named, or from her own good sense and appreciation of the beautiful, had not disfigured herself by the adoption of those modish monstrosities in head-gear which then passed current as hats and bonnets, but wore a low-crowned, wide-brimmed, round straw hat, trimmed with ribbons the hue of her dress, which served alike as a protection from sun and rain : her chestnut hair, neither frizzed nor pomatumed, nor powdered, wantoned beneath her hat in rings of nature's curling ; her hoop

was of the very smallest dimensions, her open robed dress was composed of rustling mulberry-coloured lutestring brocaded with amber, displaying beneath, a petticoat of quilted amber taffeta, silk clocked stockings and high-heeled bronze shoes with paste buckles, set off her small foot and neat ankle : long mittens covered her white arms, on one of which was suspended a large spangled fan :— the universal scarlet cloak with its hood—for utility not display—completed her attire, as sensible, useful, and good as any invented in modern times.

In shape and material Mrs. Ford's dress differed little from her daughter's, but the colours were darker and more subdued : her shoes were black and so was her silk bonnet, of which the hideous Albert hat is a small and feeble imitation ; it was fastened to her banded hair and the ribbon of her matronly mob-cap by a diamond-headed pin, or bodkin as it was called —and was as ugly an appendage as one could expect to see when no reason for its use existed in the cushioned, pomatumed, and lappeted towers of hair, once the boast of our dirty ancestors ; but fashions outlive uses, and dress was not then the ephemeral thing it is now. Materials were pure and unmixed ; durability, not variety, being considered : the wedding outfit would almost last the life : only aristocratic belles and dames could afford to ape the Parisians, and change their garments as every

fresh freak or whim brought forth absurd novelty, therefore Mrs. Ford continued to wear that which had been her best bonnet for years.

The three passed through the churchyard, up the aisle to their cushioned pew near the pulpit, just as the bell ceased tolling, and the clergyman entered the reading-desk. As the service proceeded, Alice observed with some surprise that their companion was at a loss to thread the labyrinths of the liturgy, a fact rendered more apparent by the large type of the prayer-books, discernible from some little distance; and this to one acquainted with the ritual from childhood seemed to bode no good in the man. The day was heavy, and so was the sermon, and under the influence of one or both Mr. Heywood fell asleep, and nodded until the pealing organ roused him from his ill-timed slumbers. His chagrin on awaking was apparent, but not all his profuse apologies as they returned through the churchyard homewards, surrounded by bowing and curtseying country folk, could dissipate her growing antipathy to this man, whose face haunted her unpleasantly, as one seen somewhere in a dream, or in some far-away time.

As they left the church gates, among the crowd of idlers she noticed an athletic stranger in a nondescript garb, half-seaman, half-landsman, with rough black hair and stubbly beard, and a complexion coloured by exposure or climate, who eyed them all narrowly,

herself in particular, and once she fancied a quick glance of intelligence passed between the man and Mr. Heywood. But this must have been fancy, for what connection could there possibly be between that coarse-looking fellow and the well-dressed, elegant individual by her side? so she determined to dismiss the unworthy thought. However, she asked Mr. Heywood if he had remarked the stranger and his looks, and on his replying in the negative would have directed his attention to the man, but he had disappeared in the crowd.

"I am surprised you did, not observe him," said she, wonderingly; "there was something so very peculiar in his appearance."

"You forget, Miss Ford, that all the rustics assembled here are equally strangers to me, though not to you, one face would not impress me more than another; and," continued he, in an undertone, bending towards her as he spoke, "with so sweet a face to contemplate as the one before me, I may be pardoned if that rude clown escaped my observation."

This open compliment from so new an acquaintance, not less than the glance of admiration which accompanied it, somewhat disconcerted Alice, driving recent impressions from her mind, but only to return with fresh force, for the flattery annoyed her; a proof that there was no responsive echo in her heart. That

which is gross flattery from the unregarded, is cherished sweetness from the lips we love.

Mrs. Ford, less observant of microscopic trifles than her daughter, was perfectly fascinated with the smiling and attentive gentleman, whom she lauded to Michael as a mirror of perfection. His generous and humane attention to her husband first bespoke her goodwill, which was increased every hour by his obliging manner, fluent conversation, and evident desire to render himself agreeable.

Nor was Michael's prepossession less: won over in the first instance by the courteous surrender of an afternoon to his service in Chester, and by his apparent promptitude in business matters, the Delamere Forest transactions only served to confirm his favourable impressions, so he was gratified to find Margaret's opinion, then, as ever, coincided with his own.

After dinner, Mr. Ford volunteered to show his guest over the farm, and, at Mr. Heywood's repeated request, Alice accompanied them, with a reluctance she did not care to let her father see, he was so wrapped up in his new friend.

Being the Sabbath, of course all farming operations were suspended, but they wandered through the corn-fields, where flocks of geese were picking up the ripe grain from amongst the stubble; through the meadows where stout horses and large numbers of sleek cows grazed and ruminated, or

scattered sheep nibbled the sweet grass close to the roots ; through the orchard crowded with trees filled with pears and apples ready to be pulled, ripening plums, and damsons waiting for future frosts ; through the large and well-filled stack and poultry yards ; the barns, the granary, the shippings, dairy, press-room and cheese-room ; Mr. Ford explaining processes not in operation with the gusto of a man proud of his calling, and the skill he had brought to bear upon it.

Mr. Heywood listened attentively—with now and then a furtive glance or whispered word to his fair companion, whose colour came and went in fitful flushes—examined carefully, praised judiciously, and was quite enthusiastic on farming, and country life, when they reached the room in which tea was laid.

This room was situated on the opposite side of the hall to the one previously occupied during Mr. Heywood's stay, and was lit by a deep bay window, round which the jessamine clustered its fragrant stars, and where a comfortable window-seat invited the luxurious to sit and survey the rich foliage, or inhale the perfume of sweet flowers. After tea, Alice took her seat at the harpsichord (an instrument in shape, not *tone*, like a modern grand piano), and played with much feeling a number of chants and sacred melodies, Mr. Heywood standing by her side, and bending over her with a thoroughly enraptured gaze.

Above the harpsichord hung a sampler, bearing the name of Alice Ford, containing some marvellously irregular verses, a very apocryphal "Tree of Life," a wondrously rigid serpent, gorilla-like representations of Adam and Eve, and, as Mrs. Ford exultingly displayed, the needle with which the careful and orderly girl had worked the whole. Then there was a portrait of Alice, painted on white lutestring, and embroidered in fine silk all over, except arms and neck and face; the artist had depicted her with a canary, held by a riband, fluttering on her finger, whilst an angular squirrel and a rabbit gambolled at her feet. This Mr. Heywood regarded with much apparent interest, and openly avowed that he "envied them its possession," an exclamation received with evident gratification by her parents—by herself in silent displeasure.

When Mr. Heywood again retired to rest in his comfortable room, he held a consultation with himself, and thus his cogitations shaped themselves: "What a d——d fool I was to go to church with that girl. I might have stayed to bear the father company with a good grace; and double d——d to fall asleep. I should have taken a snuff-box; snuff would have kept my senses awake! And Alice, with her beautiful quick eyes, saw me fumbling with the leaves of the book! I saw she did. She little thinks, though, the years that have passed since I saw the inside of a

church ! And that fellow, what was he doing there ? But she is lovely, beyond question ; a desirable wife, if not too determined. I read resolution in her eye and lip, and her face is a pretty legible volume. And what a farm ! The old fellow must be richer than we calculated (Who did he mean by *we*?) Well, I've crept up *his* sleeve tolerably, I've a notion. As for the mother, she's but a cypher ; however, cyphers give importance to units, so I must get round the cypher too. I wish I could win the girl over before I go: I fear I make no way with *her* ! I wonder if that d——d stupid jackass Latham remembers her yet ? He used to be quite soft about her when she went to school at Miss Briscoe's. She does not seem to have any remembrance of me. What a change a periwig makes in a man ! I hope they won't go to the Grange before Christmas ; but I can put a spoke in *that* wheel ! If I came down to Northwich December Fair, I might make my footing sure. I *must* do it ! If they go to the Grange, and she meets Latham, my chance is a poor one. Schoolgirl as she was, I always suspected her of a sneaking kindness for that d——d rascal ! I don't want *him* for a rival ! Well, well, play your cards boldly, Robert Heywood ; trump after trick, that's your game, and may you keep on winning!"

If Mr. Ford could have heard Robert Heywood's thoughts that night, would he have said to his wife in

connubial confidence, in the privacy of their own chamber—"Mr. Heywood seems to have taken a fancy to our Alice, and I'm glad of it?" or would the wife so readily have responded, "So am I?"

## CHAPTER VI.

## SHADOWS ROUND THE WINDOW-SEAT.

THE following morning Mr. Heywood came down to breakfast in his travelling dress, pleading as his excuse, the necessity for his immediate departure, accompanied with many expressions of regret that the urgency of his business would not permit a longer stay with the hospitable friends, to whom his “heart had already gone forth,” glancing expressively towards Alice as he spoke; but as she was then engaged pouring out the coffee, the look was lost upon *her*, at least.

“ Is not this a very hasty determination? I thought you would have remained with us some days. Is your business so very imperative ?” inquired Mr. Ford, really grieved to lose him.

“ Well,” answered he very deliberately, as though debating with himself, “ I *must* see my customers in Northwich this morning ; and expect a letter will be lying at the post-office which will determine my move-

ments. I suppose you are aware the principal commerce of Chester Fair is a barter trade?" (Mr. Ford nodded assent.) "Well, the Welsh flannels and other bulky goods I took in exchange, were forwarded by canal to Manchester, at the close of the fair, and had not been delivered at the warehouse when Mr. Cardwell communicated with me last. If I am not advised of their arrival, I must ride post-haste to Warrington, to ascertain the cause of delay, or endeavour to obtain some tidings of the missing goods. Otherwise——" and he paused.

"Otherwise, I hope you will return hither, Mr. Heywood. We are homely, but very hearty; too honest to press your stay if urgent business calls you hence; but I trust hospitable enough to desire your company, and give you the best we have got, with a genuine welcome, so long as you please to remain;" and as he spoke Mr. Ford extended his hand across the table and gave Mr. Heywood's delicate fingers a hearty grip, forgetful of his own cut palm, in confirmation of his speech.

"Perhaps," quietly suggested Mrs. Ford, "the goods have arrived safely by this time, canal carriage is but slow, but then it is sure. Alice, press Mr. Heywood's return, if his letter be satisfactory."

POLITELY, but reservedly, Alice seconded her parent's invitation for their guest to remain; and though in his heart he cursed her coldness, he smiled and bowed, and

declared he should be “delighted to extend his visit if practicable ;”—and he meant it too.

All the household, Peggy included (for he had contrived to ingratiate himself into that damsel’s favour), followed Mr. Heywood to the gate with handshaking and good wishes, and watched the graceful figure of the horseman down the lane and over the ford, until the bend of the road hid horses, and pack, and rider from view. All—no, not all the household ; Alice contented herself with bidding him “Good-bye” at the door, extending her hand, which he pressed with a warmth and a whispered word which once more caused the blood to mantle in her face with an indignant flush, as she turned away to pursue her ordinary avocations.

Sire and matron construed flush and reserve into the blush of dawning love, and maidenly timidity. Did Robert Heywood make any such mistake ? Not he. He passed out of sight and hearing with set teeth and knitted brows ; and the muttered thought of his heart was, “That I desire, I’ll have, even if the devil stands in the gap !”

There was a letter at the post-office addressed to “Mr. Robert Heywood” (Esqrs. were not then plentiful as blackberries), and a rather unique epistle it was.

“SIR,—Snow has melted, and the dust is laid ;

old iron in demand ; Welsh flannels come to hand, marketable at a premium. What of the new speculation ?

“ Yours to command,

“ J. C.”

Folding this document, with a smile of satisfaction, he turned his horse’s head towards an inn in Witton Street, where he dismounted, gave his horses in charge to the ostler, and selecting a man from the group of idlers lounging about the stable-yard, after a few words, possibly of bargain, transferred the pack to the man’s shoulders, and sallied forth to the shops of his customers. By a strange coincidence this was the athletic, bronzed stranger Alice had remarked at the church gate.

Mr. Heywood’s customers were few, and the business invariably transacted in the back parlours with closed doors ; but the pack was considerably lightened before they returned to the inn, and the bagman dismissed his singular porter after paying him very liberally for his short service.

By the time he had discussed a late dinner at the inn (cooked after the ordinary meal was cleared away), mused awhile on possibilities and probabilities, called for writing materials, and answered his correspondent J.C., the evening shadows had closed around ; so he ordered his horses, paid his bill, and returned ;

as he had all the while intended, to Ford-brook farm. His offer to depart had been little more than a ruse to elicit some token of Alice's feeling towards himself, and obtain a more pressing and extended invitation from the grateful yeoman and his wife. He had succeeded in the latter only.

After tea that evening, while Mr. Ford and his wife were discussing, with more than ordinary unanimity, the many apparent good properties of their late visitor, their daughter, with a troubled face, selected her work from a well-filled basket, and retired to the solitude of the best parlour, as she had done more than once since their residence at Grenville Grange became a theme of conversation. That night she closed the door, and, crossing the room to the bay window, seated herself on the wooden window-seat, with her face to the gate, and plied her needle actively. She was netting, with thick cotton, curtains for their new home, and as she passed her needle swiftly through the loops, or drew the stitches to the mesh, she tightened each knot with a determined jerk, as though life was on her thread, and she wove the web of many destinies. Presently her speed slackened as her mood changed, then her hands faltered, and finally dropped idly on her lap, whilst needle, mesh and netting, fell to the floor, and lay there unregarded. The disturbing present was gone, and the past, softened by memory and distance, had usurped its place. She was once more

a girl of fourteen, conforming to the rigid rules of the Misses Briscoe's school in Queen Street, Chester, with no means of communication with home, save the routine letters which told, in set and lying phraseology, how happy she was under the Misses Briscoe's mild dominion ; how much she loved each amiable preceptress ; and how sorry she would be to quit their delightful abode, where study and difficult tasks were made positively pleasureable, instruction was so agreeably conveyed. She thought of the thick bread across which a butter-knife had been wiped ; of the pale stone-coloured milk-and-water, called by courtesy (in the shape of Miss Briscoe), tea ; of the three mornings a week when she shared her breakfast with schoolfellows more hungry and less dainty than herself, to whom the egg-shells, and other delicate sweepings of the kitchen-dresser, were less repulsive ; of the rolls (not sweets) bought with hoarded pence by friendly and pitying day-scholars, and eaten surreptitiously. Then she thought of the hurried undressing in the dark—or light—of a chamber dip, left on the staircase for ten minutes, to illuminate four rooms, while their occupants doffed their day-clothes, donned their night-robés, carefully folded the former, mumbled their prayers, and shuffled into their scantily covered beds ; then, of the ringing morning bells, the scramble to dress ; the second bell, the long prayers in the school-room ; of the wearying class for courtseying practice ;

the back-board ; the stocks ; the military collar, and other instruments of feminine school torture (of that century) ; of the fines levied for standing on the hearth, for entering the kitchen, for dilatoriness in dressing, for hanging bag, slate, or pinafore on a wrong hook, misplacing a book, or making a blot ; of the pretentious box for “clothing the poor,” into which these mulcted half-pence, and even sixpences, were dropped for half-yearly dispensation, by the charitable and pious spinsters. Then she remembered the gentle face of the thoroughly educated lady-like governess, the orphan daughter of a poor naval officer, who left them, all too soon for the pupils, hardly soon enough for the teacher—left them as the wife of another officer ; and the wedding came before her as an event in the dull monotony of school life. Then she conjured up with Memory’s wand the benign features of that aged servant of God, John Wesley, as she saw them, as he made prayer in their schoolroom one Sabbath evening, when, his public ministration over, he accepted Sister Briscoe’s invitation to “sojourn for the night beneath her humble roof,” and she felt again the light touch of his reverend hand upon her head, as he blessed her and her schoolmates at his departure in the morning.

From John Wesley her thoughts reverted to the octagon chapel in Foregate Street, where the Misses Briscoe and her pupils worshipped on Sabbath evenings;

thence to St. John's ancient church, with its hideous excrescences of heavy galleries and high pews, in which Miss Briscoe's young ladies faced Mr. Twemlow's young gentlemen, during the morning service. Here memory lingered lovingly, for one face among the elder pupils had captivated her young fancy, and her mind's eye followed the youth down the aisle, and through the beautiful arch of the old church porch, until capricious memory gave her back a holiday—when older grown and budding into womanhood—to visit a day-scholar, long after the attractive "young gentleman" had left Mr. Twemlow's pew and academy.

It gave her back, too, her former self, tripping down Watergate Street, and stopped rudely by a sickly-looking young man, with light hair, and bright, unpleasant eyes, who strove to kiss her, and insisted on joining her in her walk. The same memory brought again to her assistance, a much younger man, with a courageous front, and dauntless bearing, who interposed between her persecutor and herself, and compelled the bully to relinquish the arm he held, then, like a brother, guarded her to her friend's door, and, unknown to her, stood sentinel there for hours to protect her home, because the pale-faced scoundrel had been also on the watch. Again she saw the scowl on that white face, and the defiant eye; but they passed, and there were other

half-holidays, and other accidental meetings with her champion : the pleasant face again occupied a pew in St. John's church, and there were little floral offerings which still lay enshrined between the leaves of her Church Service. And there was a name which had been only a sweet memory ; but now she read "Latham" by the living light of hope.

Gradually, as the young girl sat there looking out from that window and seeing, not the garden, nor the gate, but the panorama of the past, scented not with jessamine, but the faded flowers of the long ago—gradually and slowly the evening shadows came trooping down, first as a twilight veil, then deeper and deeper until night's dark pall rested on the tree-tops, and swept the ground with its sable fringe ; gradually the shadows closed around her as she sat, but there was light in the chamber of her heart, and she saw them not. But a darker shadow than night was on the threshold, and blind eyes saw it not. Robert Heywood was at the door, and was welcomed as we welcome sunshine.

The light and warmth faded out of the heart of Alice, startled into consciousness by Peggy's loud greeting, as she opened the door for the returning visitor, with the abrupt exclamation, "Glad to see you back again, Mester Yawood ! Oi knowed you'd come afore supper, for oi dropped a knife o'th kitchen floor this afternoon, and oi knowed o'ther yo' or sum'on

else 'ud be here. Walk in, sir; mester 'll be reeght glad to see ye, and missis too, oi reckon. Mester Ford, here's Mester Yawood back again," said she, opening the sitting-room door and ushering in the visitor, and almost in the same breath, bawling at the pitch of her voice, "Deack ! Deack ! come hither, and take Mr. Yawood's beasts to the stable!"

Dick came, and went, and Peggy retired to her culinary demesne ; but Alice sat still in the window-seat, as it were crouching beneath the shadow which had fallen on her like a blight ; and there she remained until a loud summons from her father compelled attention, and she left the dark room, which to her had been light, for the lighted sitting-room where she felt a shadow brooded. She entered with dazzled eyes, muttering something about sleepiness, and was polite in her reception of her father's friend—nothing more.

The stiffness and soreness of Michael's limbs did not pass away in a day or two, and during that time locomotion was confined to the farm and its surroundings, or to a day's fishing in the river Dane ; but before the end of the week which Mr. Heywood (not willing to risk a second Sunday sermon) had assigned as the extreme limit of his stay, Michael, with a desire to cater for the pleasure of his guest, proposed a visit to a salt-mine in the neighbourhood, as a remarkable natural curiosity, likely to repay inspection. The

suggestion met with the approval of Mr. Heywood and Mrs. Ford ; but Alice, with true feminine perversity, declined to be of the party. It was known and argued by her mother, "that as she had never been in a salt-mine, she could not be aware of the treat in store for her." Alice, however, was pertinacious in refusing, urging as her excuse "an obstinate headache."

"Perhaps, Michael, after all, we had better leave the poor girl at home if her head aches," compassionately suggested obtuse and pliable Mrs. Ford.

"Obstinate fiddlestick ! more like an obstinate temper than headache," struck in Mr. Ford, testily. "Nothing ailed the girl at breakfast, nor until I made a proposal for our joint gratification, which ought to have delighted her, when, for some nonsensical whim or other, she at once has an obstinate headache. You will put your things on, miss, and go with us without another word !" added he, decisively, surprised at this faint intimation that his wish was no longer the dominant law of his household. So Alice thought it prudent to comply, though it was with an ill grace, which her parents mentally ascribed to either female waywardness or bashfulness. How often is the result of a maiden's best reasonings and instincts, on which womanly delicacy sets the seal of secrecy, mistaken for wilfulness or caprice !

And what said Mr. Heywood during this little domestic discussion ? At first he turned away to the

window to hide his chagrin, biting his nether lip to keep *his* temper down (for that was just the feeling he had least under control); but finding Mr. Ford's view of Alice's excuse likely to prevail, he bowed, and came forward saying, graciously, "Do not let your kindly anxiety to give me a pleasure be made a cause of inconvenience or annoyance to Miss Ford. It would be a source of extreme regret to me if my visit here should be associated in your good daughter's mind with any unpleasant recollection of pain or coercion. I would leave only pleasant memories behind me, if possible. Could not this excursion be deferred until to-morrow morning? The young lady might then be better, and I could proceed on my journey from Northwich without returning hither."

"I think, Michael, as Mr. Heywood has been so kind as to suggest a change in our arrangements, to-morrow might do quite as well?" inquiringly and timidly chimed in Mrs. Ford.

"Mr. Heywood always *is* kind and considerate—always; but *I* said to-day, and to-day it shall be! Is not to-morrow Saturday?"

"Ah, yes, to be sure. We could not very well leave the farm on a Saturday; but I must go and get ready," said acquiescent Mrs. Ford, as she turned to leave the room for that purpose. Alice had been gone some minutes.

For once she "got ready" quicker than her daugh-

ter ; but soon Alice made her appearance, with heightened colour and compressed lips, and a light in her brown eye very different from the languor of indisposition : resolution and self-assertion were there, but not the heaviness occasioned by pain. Possibly the headache *was* feigned, and Mr. Ford saw it. In that case he would deem her refusal a breach of hospitality, and an insult to his guest ; so no wonder he chafed at opposition to his desires—to say nothing of his will.

Michael paired off with Mrs. Ford and led the way, desiring the younger couple to follow, as they did, Mr. Heywood apologizing as they went for being the “unintentional cause of annoyance to one whose favour he was so desirous to cultivate,” etcetera, etcetera.

Soon conversation became general and discursive, Michael now and then turning his head to address some observation to his very good and tried friend.

It was a beautiful autumnal day, the air neither sultry nor cool, but fresh and genial ; the trees were glorious with rich hues, from deep dark green, or olive, to full brown or bright crimson ; the brook rippled over the pebbles in faint music, late birds sang from the bramble bushes or hazel boughs ; and, altogether, the walk was an exceedingly pleasant one, notwithstanding the unaccountable shrinking of the younger lady from the advances of her companion.

Alice was certainly not prepared for the sight which

met her eyes on entering the salt-mine. It rose round and above them like a vast natural cathedral, resplendent and glistening as the numberless candles lit up, and displayed its magnificent proportions. From the principal and natural cavern, excavations branched off in different directions, the roof being supported, like that of a coal-pit, by large square pillars of the rock, left standing at regular intervals, the whole combining to form a series of aisles and arches dazzling and bewildering to the sight of unused beholders. The extreme purity of the Northwich salt-rock contributed not a little to its crystalline lustre, the splendour of which elicited many exclamations of delight and surprise both from Alice and Mr. Heywood ; indeed so engrossed was she in the contemplation of the wondrous scene, that for a time prejudices and antipathies were forgotten, and she became companionable and loveable as ever.

Mr. Ford observed with pleasure the radiant change in her features, and stooping towards Margaret uttered his self-gratulations on having compelled her to come with them. His rejoicing was very short-lived. Turning abruptly to quit one of these sparkling arcades, as they retraced their steps to the entrance, Alice caught her high heel against some protuberance in the uneven floor, her foot turned, she slipped with a sharp cry of pain, and but for Mr. Heywood's ready arm, would have fallen to the ground. There she lay, for

the second time, in his unrepulsed embrace, in a half-swoon, which left her the consciousness of pain, and of his impassioned, straining clasp, but no ability to move, no power to resist.

"Oh, dear, dear! what shall we do?" Mrs. Ford repeatedly exclaimed, in great perturbation; while Michael, equally distressed, would have relieved Mr. Heywood of his fair burden, but his own wounded arm forbade it. Their guide was, therefore, despatched for water, but before it came she had revived under the influence of the cool air in the mines. She strove to free herself from Mr. Heywood's arms, but found she could not stand, could not bear to put her right foot to the ground, in fact. It was ascertained that she had sprained her right ankle severely, and was unable to move without acute suffering.

There was no affectation in Robert Heywood's sympathy now! Every lineament of his face showed that he suffered with her. From those wonderful pockets he produced a silk handkerchief or two, and requested Mrs. Ford to bind the injured ankle tightly, which she did, with trembling fingers. He then lifted Alice tenderly, and bore her to the entrance. As soon as they gained the open air, he spread another handkerchief on the ground, and seated her there, begging earnestly that she would continue to accept the support of his arm; and seeing that she was too faint and sick to support herself, she

may be pardoned by the most fastidious for compliance.

Meanwhile one of the guides had been despatched to the "Crown Inn" for a sedan chair, and the nearest country Esculapius. The man of draughts and boluses, splints and bandages, shook his powdered periwig gravely, felt at the ankle, here and there, with touches that made his patient wince beneath his probing fingers; then he bound up the member scientifically, and gave instructions for his patient to be carried home, which, considering that she could neither stand nor walk, was a slightly superfluous item of advice. But home she was carried as gently as possible, Mr. Heywood secretly feeing the rough chairmen to be careful with their precious freight. And though Peggy, who opened the front door, arrayed, as usual, in leather stays (worn outside), a camlet gown and petticoat, and unvarying mob-cap of spotless linen—though Peggy would have lifted out her young mistress as easily and safely as himself, he thrust her aside; and taking the dear girl once more in his arms, bore her to the window-seat in the best parlour, followed closely by that aggrieved domestic, exclaiming, as she came along, "Ah, this all comes a'goin a sight-seein' on a Friday. Oi know'd no good 'ud come on it! Oi know'd it!" But Mr. Heywood put a stop to Peggy's lachrymose ejaculations, by despatching her in all haste for pillows and cushions,

which he arranged himself so deftly and promptly that Peggy and Mrs. Ford alike looked on in wonder, both feeling themselves supplanted ; the inferiority of the one, and the passive inertness of the other, being overpowered by the more active brain and dominant will of Robert Heywood.

As for Alice, in spite of all her prejudices, her instincts, her inward shrinking from his touch, she looked her gratitude and spoke it too ; in few and brief words, it must be confessed ; but the man's heart bounded with joy as he heard them.

For the remainder of the day Mr. Heywood devoted himself entirely and assiduously to Alice, with the tact and tenderness of a woman. He adjusted her pillows, administered the cooling draught Esculapius had forwarded, read to her, and conversed with her ; so that when twilight closed in round the two in that bay window, though the shadow was there, deeper and closer than before, the light of the past was not there, to reveal the dark present and looming future.

Nothing could exceed the delight and gratification of Mr. and Mrs. Ford at the kindness and tenderness of Mr. Heywood to Alice, and her seeming acceptance of his attentions ; mistaking, as is too often the case, her gratitude for warmer emotion.

That evening their new friend brought from his chamber presents, which he distributed very grace-

fully. Meeting Peggy at the door of the kitchen, he placed a lawn neckerchief and bright ribbon for her Sunday hat, in her brown hand, and begged she would "wear them for his sake." With profuse thanks, and many bobbing curtsies, she took his gifts, and ran delighted to display her finery to Betty, the dairy-maid, and Dick, the farming-man, between whom and herself a sort of sneaking kindness was supposed to exist. " Didn't oi tell yo," said she, waving her prize triumphantly, " didn't oi tell yo oi should have summut given me. Oi know'd it wasn't for naught oï'd that great white spot on moi thumb nail all week ! ' *Gifts on the thum'b are sure to come!* ' and you see oi've getten moine."

" Neay, lass, the spots o' thy thumb ha' naught to do wi' it. It's more loike thy good temper an goodwill, and Mester Yawood's own koindness. Don't thee be so suppositious."

In the sitting-room he found Mrs. Ford ; and, for her acceptance, offered a rich dress of Lyons silk, as a "very small token of the esteem in which he held herself and every member of the family, and his appreciation of their generous hospitality;" he "begged she would not pain him by a refusal." With some little hesitation this also was accepted, and now it only remained to induce Alice to receive a gift from his hands. He entered the parlour with less than his ordinary confidence, but the two mould candles on

the table shed so feeble a light, that the window-seat was in a twilight very favourable to his purpose. Having raised her pillow, inquired if the pain in her ankle had subsided under recent fomentation, and received an affirmative reply, he drew his chair closer, and, with a very perceptible tremor in his voice, said, “Miss Ford—Alice, I depart in the early morning for Manchester; it may be some months before I have again the pleasure of seeing you: pardon me, oh, pardon me, if what I say is premature, and forgive the impulse which hurries me on. I am a stranger, an entire stranger, and therefore at a disadvantage; but oh, beautiful Alice, be to me less cold than you have been; let me dare to hope that in some future day you may receive me with a warmer welcome, and listen to my love, for I do love you;” and for once in his life Robert Heywood spoke truth.

Many times during this earnest address Alice would have interrupted the speaker, but his impetuosity bore no check. Now, she said, kindly but sadly :

“I am sorry, Mr. Heywood, it should be so. I am grateful to you, very grateful, for the invaluable service you rendered my dear father; and, lying here as I do, bearing around me the signs of your goodness and gentleness (she did not say tenderness), I should be unworthy a thought did I not gratefully appreciate all you have done for us, for me; but I beg you will not require more. As a friend, you will be most

welcome to us all. I cannot promise more," and her voice trembled with reluctance to give pain. She had felt the beating of his heart, the tremor through his whole frame, as he clasped her closely to his breast when she would have fallen in the mine, and that rapid pulsation telling of genuine emotion, had set her reason in array against her antipathies. She felt she had been prejudiced and unjust without cause, and was anxious to repair the error with friendship, not love. What time might have effected in the obliteration of old memories is not to be known, but now she had no love for him, and so she candidly avowed.

" You know little, nothing of me as yet, Miss Ford. Will you, will you, in mercy, permit me to renew this subject months hence, here or at the Grange, when time will prove my truth and the true nature of your own feelings towards me ? Will you, Alice ? "

" There is little likelihood of my sentiments changing ; it is better, therefore, this painful conversation should not be renewed."

" Alice, I cannot go away with this repulse ; I feel you do not know your own heart. You are young—I will wait—I must wait, till time shall mature your own sentiments, and then I will come for your decision." He paused—there was no response, and he drew a favourable augury from her silence—the silence of sadness, not indecision.

" Will you, Alice, dear Alice, accept from me, as

a dear friend, this trifle : it may serve to remind you of me when I am gone ; and, oh, may it serve to fan friendship into the love I covet."

" Why do you persist, Mr. Heywood, in asking the love I cannot bestow ? I will not wound you by refusing your gift " (an exquisitely carved fan of foreign workmanship) ; " but I shall preserve it in memory of my father's true friend—and—mine. Do not seek for anything beyond," and she held out her hand to him as a pitying sister might have done. Robert Heywood raised it respectfully but tenderly to his lips, and released it with a sigh, saying, impressively, yet mournfully, as he did so, " Alice, I can wait."

## CHAPTER VII.

## HOPES AND FEARS.

ALICE kept her room the next morning, Mrs. Ford conveying her adieus to Mr. Heywood in language perhaps a trifle more flattering to the gentleman's vanity than the original message, and he, not knowing the favourable medium through which it percolated, cherished each word as full of hopeful meaning. Prior to his departure Robert Heywood had a long conversation with Mr. Ford, on the subject of his pretensions, his hopes and aspirations, his business, and his prospects, in which a few grains of truth were hid in a bushel of falsehood; but Michael, though a very good farmer, was not able to winnow his wheat, and took much for granted that in common prudence he should have tested. - The result of this interview was, that Robert Heywood was at full liberty to come and go whensoever he listed, and to woo and win his lady-love with her father's full consent, as speedily as might be.

Of the young lady's own acquiescence a question was never raised : Mr. Heywood carefully avoided the subject, and to Mr. Ford it never occurred. Here was an eligible offer made by a most fascinating man, who had rendered him an essential service in a sore strait, the partner in a wealthy firm ; all, in fact, a parent's heart could wish, and, as a matter of course, the daughter's also. Any idea that Alice might possibly have a counter opinion never irradiated his mind.

Fortunately for Alice, since it saved her much pain and persecution, Mr. Heywood, with some plausible sophistry, had contrived to imbue Michael with the notion that it would be most desirable to leave her unfettered by an engagement, in this early stage of his wooing, and that the confidential communication he had thought, as an honourable man, necessary to make to Mr. Ford, should remain a matter of private understanding between them until his return to Northwich the first week in December, for the winter-fair, or earlier, if the emergencies of business would permit. "Capital business-man, Mr. Heywood, but not the less impetuous a lover!" So thought Mr. Ford ; but love-making lacked railroad facilities then.

Michael's arm and his daughter's ankle grew strong and well in time, and both pursued their avocations as heretofore ; but as the days wore on, and letters came from Mr. Peover containing brief statements of

progress on the works at the Grange, she was observed to sit much alone, to sing less freely and frequently; at times to carol like a bird, then cease her song suddenly, and sink into idle reverie. Proofs positive to all sagacious minds that her thoughts wandered to Manchester, and that the prospect of removing farther from *his* home filled her with sadness.

About this time Mr. Peover received a letter, bearing neither location, date, nor signature, if we except a rude but expressive hieroglyph. It ran thus:

“The ‘Grange’ must not be habitable before Christmas. I say, *must not!* If it is, beware the consequences. I do not warn twice.”



The dangling figure caught the old man’s eye before he read the text, but as he hastily scanned the lines the blood forsook his face and lips, leaving them of an ashen hue, and he fell back in his office-chair utterly prostrated. For some time he lay there, helpless and powerless, then slowly recovering his scattered senses, he reperused the mysterious document on his desk. “God help me!” said he, wearily, as from extreme mental anguish. “God help me! how that

viper stings—that viper stings! Who shall say he can sin in secret—secret? Is not the whip I knotted years ago scourging me now—scourging me now?" and he writhed as though under the infliction of the lash. "Does not every coin I touch, however honestly earned, seem to blister my hands. Yet what did I more than any other man in the city would have done under like temptation—under like temptation!" Then after a pause, as if for deliberation, he gathered up the letter, saying, "I will consult Martha, I will consult Martha!" and stumbled up the uneven stairs with a step very unlike his ordinary springy jerk.

Mrs. Peover was seated with a basket of napery by her side, darning a thin place in a table-cloth, but, as he staggered rather than walked into the room, she rose from her work, observant of his wan face, and stepping forward hastily, took her husband's hand, with the anxious enquiry, "Joseph, what has occurred to discompose you thus? I have not seen you so agitated for some years."

"Read that, read that!"

She took the letter he thrust into her hand, and while he sank into a chair, leaned his arms on the table and buried his face upon them, she calmly wiped her gold-rimmed spectacles, re-adjusted them on her nose, and read the letter which had fallen into the house like a bomb-shell—read it over twice, took off her spectacles, replaced them deliberately in their

shagreen case, and having thus given herself time to think, approached the stricken man, and placed her hand upon his shoulder.

"Is this letter all that has terrified you so much?"

"All! I should think it is, and enough too, more than enough!"

"I see nothing here to alarm an honest man!" Mr. Peover winced, but she continued, "Yes, an honest man! You need not shrink. If I felt you to be any other in your heart, I would disown you for my husband. What you found buried was your own morally, if not legally, and only a quibble destroys your legal right. Did you not regard it at the time as the special gift of Providence?"

"Yes, then; but not now—not now."

"And why not now? Have you not given away in public thrice what you found in private? Have you not been a faithful steward of the talent placed in your hands? Has not the secret store increased and multiplied tenfold? Has there not been a blessing on our means? Did you ever turn the naked, the cold, the hungry from your door unclothed, unwarmed, unfed?"

"Never, never; thank God!"

"Yes; and thank him for the means to be charitable. How often have I heard you repeat the motto of this house—'God's Providence is mine Inheritance,' yet you quail before the idle threat of a

reprobate! I suppose this is one of that fellow's scrawls; an intimidation to serve the purpose of some of his dissolute companions!"

"I suppose so—I suppose so! But what am I to do, Martha—what am I to do?"

"Whatever is just and right! If you delay the repairs of the Grange, I am convinced you will become the unconscious abettor of some iniquitous scheme or other. Do your work manfully, in defiance of Ned's dastardly threats. It is not possible he could do you a serious injury."

"Ah, my dear Martha! but that is not all—not all. I have had a perilous secret from you these three years—these three years;" and the old man proceeded to relate to this true partner of his joys and sorrows, the secret he had kept so long even from her."

"This is indeed something more serious; but as in this case you have not the shadow of a stain on your own conscience, why should you blench at a threat like Ned's? Fear not! the villain will hang himself, not you."

"True, Martha, true; but circumstantial evidence and false accusation will outweigh justice—will outweigh justice!"

"Yes, human justice, not Divine. Come, Joseph, rouse, be more a man. What would pious John Wesley say if he saw his old disciple thus sinking in

helpless imbecility through want of faith ! He would grieve over you as a backslider ! Rouse !”

And he strove to “rouse,” impelled by the stronger mind of his wife, but the effort was a feeble one ; the figure dangling from the cord was present to his imagination, and he could not free himself from this new terror.

“Joseph,” said Mrs. Peover, “come with me into our chamber, and let us pray ; it is for seasons like this that prayer is chiefly needed. Come.”

Under the influence of his wife, Mr. Peover mastered his fears, and the work at the Grange proceeded without interruption. The workmen, as the builder had projected, were boated down with provisions for the day, and brought back by the same conveyance each evening. There was a sharp and active foreman over the whole, and in about a month a great change for the better was visible, alike in premises and grounds. Workmen swarmed round the place like bees ; hammer and saw, chisel and mallet, trowel and plummet, pick, spade, rake, hoe, and wheelbarrow, were heard making a pleasant noise in reclaiming one of the waste places of the earth. Men of many idioms were gathered there, working with hearty goodwill for a master who paid well ; men from the highlands and lowlands of Scotland, from the moors of Durham and Northumberland, the hills of Lancashire and Cumberland, the fens of Lincolnshire, the

weald of Kent, the downs of Sussex, the wilds of Connaught, the glens of Galway, and the mountains of Wales; all sent their quota, and sure such a Babel of tongues was seldom heard before. But the purpose was answered: no one knew of the ghost, so no one was deterred from working by any idle apprehensions. The men who removed the furniture from the haunted rooms, and the carpenter who planed down the blood-stained boards, did their work first, and were then superseded by others who saw nothing more than a ruinous old mansion they had the good luck to be employed in restoring, and so the process of restoration went on vigorously. The breaches in the boundary walls were built up; the heavy iron gates swung on new hinges; the tangled mass of weeds and rubbish which defaced the garden grounds were roughly cleared away, and carted to help in filling the moat, from which the waters had been slowly drained off; loosened or defective masonry had been secured or replaced; rotten window frames had given place to new; outbuildings refitted or altered; and the whole was in such a state of forwardness that Mr. Peover wrote to acquaint the owner, and solicit his presence for final instructions.

During this period, Mr. Latham had made a point of joining Mr. Peover in his many inspections of the Grange, betraying an interest in every barrow of mould and every hod of mortar, wholly incomprehensible to

the old man. It was no uncommon thing for him to lend a hand to any man he saw at a temporary loss for an assistant ; or to take up a spade, or pruning knife, and work for an hour, so eager did he seem to facilitate the arrival of his neighbours. Mr. Peover by no means shared his impetuosity ; the letter was fresh in his memory, and served as an effective check to any demonstration of impatience to complete his task ; and, indeed, as the weather gradually became more unsettled, the days short and dark, delays often occurred, not of his creating ; but these he regarded with a complacency very foreign to his restless temperament.

All the rumours rife in Shotwick, relative to the almost marvellous transformation of the Grange, had their rise in these frequent visits of George Latham, for as, on his return to the lodge, he invariably acquainted his mother with every alteration and improvement effected ; and Madam Latham (as she was called) as invariably retailed these items of news to her pretty protégé, Phœbe, whenever she came to pay her respects, which was seldom less than thrice a week ; on these occasions, it somehow happened, very accidentally, of course, that Miles Wood, or Matthew Spark, or both, would be loitering in the churchyard, through which lay Phœbe's path homeward, and whichever became the fortunate companion of her walk, became also the recipient of the scraps of information she had gathered,

garnished, it may be, with addenda and flourishes of her own. A new comet to the astronomical world, a new continent to the geographical, could scarcely have created a greater interest than did a “new tenant” for the long empty Grange ; and as none of the villagers would venture near enough to observe for themselves, these details of progress were greedily devoured. Curiosity was not wanting—only courage, and the village was in a ferment of wonder and expectation when Michael Ford trotted through, accompanied by Mr. Peover, and rode direct to the Grange. Before they had completed the circuit of the grounds, they were joined by Mr. Latham, whose frank countenance brightened when Mr. Peover, shaking the young man heartily by the hand, presented him to Michael, as “the esteemed son of his regretted old friend, and a most worthy young man—a most worthy young man !”

“I have had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Latham before,” said Michael, acknowledging Mr. Latham’s salutation. “You forget, Mr. Peover, that it was to his courtesy I owed my introduction to yourself.”

“Oh, no, I didn’t—I didn’t; thought perhaps *you* might have forgotten *him*, though !”

“Not very likely, Mr. Peover, considering the name he bears,” responded Michael, with a very slight touch of acrimony in his tone.

“Remember the man, and forget the name; forget

the name if it offends ; but the name of a good man cannot be a bad name, Mr. Ford ! even if bad men spell theirs with the same letters ! Forget the name," said Mr. Peover, abruptly.

" I should be sorry if any personal act of my own, should cause my name to grate harshly on any man's ears ; least of all Mr. Ford's."

" And why so, young gentleman ; why least of all on mine ?" asked Michael, quickly ; turning sharply round to confront him as he spoke.

A visible flush tinged his broad white forehead, as he answered with some little hesitancy : " Because I would fain live on good terms with my neighbours, and endeavour, in my own person, to efface the evil memories connected with another owner of my name."

" Worthily spoken, Mr. Latham ; and if as worthily acted out, we are likely to be good friends yet, in spite of your name. Give me your hand, sir ; I hope we may be better acquainted."

They had been standing in the porch during this conversation, but now Michael invited Mr. Latham to accompany them over the house. Pails and brushes, paint-cans, and tool-baskets obstructed passages and blocked up doorways, and two or three women were there with tucked-up petticoats, scrubbing floors, or dusting and polishing the carved panels. Mr. Peover pointed out the lightness of the rooms and corridors, with the encroaching ivy cut away, and, as they

ascended the staircase, enquired which rooms had better be completed first.

"Oh, by all means, the large drawing-room, and Ailsie's chamber. I have ordered new furniture for those, and hope to have a surprise for mother and daughter when they come."

"I believe I had the pleasure of seeing your daughter a few years ago; she was a pupil at Miss Briscoe's school when I was studying at Mr. Twemlow's, if I remember rightly (Remember rightly! would he ever forget?)."

"I have never heard my daughter name you, Mr. Latham?" said Michael, half musing, half questioning.

"Possibly not; our acquaintance was so very slight; at church the pews of our respective schools fronted each other, and so did our seats; and long after I had completed my studies, I was fortunately able to free Miss Ford from insult in the street. Most likely she forgot a circumstance so trivial, or did not think it worth mention."

"Very likely," said Michael, and turned away to discuss paint and plaster with the builder.

"Very likely!" with what a chill these words, though they were the echo of his own (as lightly spoken), smote on the heart of George Latham. Forgotten; very likely! and he had been cherishing her memory for this: she had been the theme of his conversation, his hopes, his plans, for this. His

venerable mother had been his confidant, and into her willing ear he had poured out all the fluent fancies of his boyish flame—the riper feeling of his manhood ; and now—it was “very likely” she had forgotten him ! Oh, love ! prone to self-torture ! will thy history ever change ?

They had reached the chamber of Alice, and an animated discussion on the colour the wainscot should be painted, proceeded between the contractor and Mr. Ford ; the relative merits of blue, pink, green, and brown, were severally brought forward, without a decision ; at length Mr. Ford appealed to Mr. Latham for a verdict.

“ If you consult me, gentlemen, I must say, I consider the colours you have named are too full and strong for a sleeping apartment ; a young lady’s room especially. I think dove-colour more in harmony with the softness of the feminine mind, more conducive to quiet and repose. It might be relieved with any of the tints you have named, and the draperies should suit.”

“ A Daniel come to judgment, yea, a Daniel ! ” quoth Mr. Peover, laughing and clapping Mr. Latham heartily on the back, in blissful unconsciousness that he had been quoting a “ wicked play-actor.” So dove-colour it was to be, puckered out with blue, in accordance with the only sensible idea on the subject. But rose-coloured were the visions of George Latham, in which

he pictured Alice Ford reposing within walls tinted from his decision. How much of the ludicrous mingles with the sentiment of young lovers, and old ones, too, we fear.

Shortly after this, Mr. Latham retired, having found it impossible to induce Mr. Ford to accept his hospitality, and pass the night at Latham Lodge; and having, moreover, ascertained that the family might be expected down in ten days or a fortnight.

After he was gone, the two men of business wandered from "garret to basement," Michael expressing his satisfaction with everything, especially the manner in which the door of the room into which the furniture was thrust, had been built up, leaving no trace of its existence on the outer wall. From the house they proceeded to the outbuildings, and instructions were given for the execution of more extensive shippions and granaries. After a few orders to the foreman, the pair mounted, rode to Shotwick, partook of a hasty meal, then leisurely pursued their ride homeward to Chester.

In a day or two, other bees joined the swarms at the hive-like Grange, in the shape of upholsterer's men, who, armed with rule and shears, hammer and tacks, went to work with a pleasant rap-tap, and the ugly dark floor of the ancient drawing-room was crimsoned over—not with blood, but brilliant Brussels carpet. Above the wide expanse of window

rich crimson damask fell in full festoons, looped up by tasselled cords of amber silk, and curtains edged with amber lace swept to the floor in soft voluminous folds. Set in a gilt frame of quaint device, with branching candelabra on each side, the concave disc of a polished mirror gave back distorted reflections of the fire-place with its fender and fire-irons of shining brass. Then more bee-like men came lumbering in with massive furniture of Spanish mahogany, ornamented with a marquetry of satinwood and ebony. They brought tables with smooth, round, tapering legs, terminating in sprawling club-like feet; chairs, with limbs to match, and backs with massive uncarved crests, lower and less painfully perpendicular than their predecessors, with cushioned seats covered with stout black leather, secured by rows of bright brass nails: sofas, scarcely smaller than some modern beds, likewise leather-cushioned and bedight with brass nails; and easy chairs, also shining with leather and nail dots, with high, straight backs, padded arms, and side rests for the head; chairs to repose in after a day's fatigue—not lounges to induce laziness. Then they lugged in a ponderous cabinet, comprising celeret, escritoire, and bookcase; the bookcase having glazed doors like church windows, curtained behind with crimson taffeta (clever contrivances those silken curtains to conceal scant libraries in the days of dear books): and then followed a new harpsichord for Alice, the one at Ford-

brook, the gift of Sir Luke to Margaret on her wedding-day, being hoarse with age, and only fit for the common household room.

Next, these busy bees swarmed in the now dove-coloured chamber, with hammers and tacks, and Kidderminster carpet, and pieces of moreen, and cards of fringe, and long spindly bed-posts, not of oak or walnut, but mahogany; and, presently, the floor harmonised with the walls, and a temple to Morpheus arose in the midst, draped with azure and fringed with dove, and the windows were curtained to match the bed, and the toilet-table held a large swing-glass in an oval frame, with drawers at its base for trinkets or gloves, or love letters or litter, and rush-bottomed chairs with painted frames were ranged round the walls; and the washstand, also of mahogany, was fitted with blue-and-white toilet-ware, as shapely as any Staffordshire then produced, but which our very artizans to-day would despise.

And then the bees departed with hammers and tacks, and remnants and snippings. And Michael Ford came to survey the cheerful rooms, and with him George Latham, and the twain pronounced a favourable verdict on the upholsterers' doings. Mr. Ford enjoyed, in anticipation, the pleasant surprise of wife and daughter; and Mr. Latham pictured that daughter moving amongst these household fittings, the light and life of the whole. How he rejoiced in

his heart over the murky November sky, and the impenetrable fog that, as it were, had compelled Michael Ford and Mr. Peover to accept his proffered hospitality, and rest the preceding night under his roof. It had brought the father of Alice in contact with his mother, a woman of stately presence, yet so genial and kindly withal, that the frost of distant reserve was sure of thaw beneath the benign influence of her sweet smile.

And so Michael had unconsciously been won to feel at ease within walls owned by and named after a Latham, and to accept a further invitation, given with a tact, forethought, and kindness he could neither dispute nor reject. The excellent old lady, with a grace and dignity befitting a duchess, yet with as true courtesy, had represented to Michael the inconvenience, not to say impossibility of any accommodation being provided for Mrs. and Miss Ford at the Grange, until their goods arrived, were unpacked and arranged. This, she urged, would be a work of days, not to be undertaken by them, fresh from a fatiguing journey ; and she offered the alternative of her home and a cordial welcome, until their own house should be fit to receive them. The ladies might go in a morning to superintend arrangements, and he might escort them each evening back to the Lodge if so disposed ; it was not fitting that they should be subjected to all the discomfort attending the removal of a large establish-

ment so great a distance ; and she hoped Mr. Ford would honour herself and son by permitting her to be of this little service to them.

How could Michael have refused, without being downright ungracious ? He had been some time cogitating how to dispose of Margaret and Alice for the few days their household goods and kitchen utensils were at sixes and sevens, and had meditated lodging them at the “ Black Bear ;” but this invitation, so hospitably given by a well disposed neighbour, albeit a stranger, had put a new and pleasant face on the question ; and so, after a little mental deliberation, a little secret fighting with prejudice, he had bowed his thanks and acceptance.

A sigh of relief from George Latham had echoed these thanks. And as on that misty morning he trod the crimson carpet, so soon to be pressed by the light feet of Alice ; and, by her father’s side, penetrated the sanctuary of the chamber prepared for her in secret by that father’s love, there were no clouds on life’s horizon, no mists obscured love’s orient sun.

A war of extermination had been waged against the colonies of bats, and owls, and spiders tenanting the old pile ; and fires blazed bright on hearths long cold ; windows begrimed with the dust and rain of years, and shrouded by rank vegetation, now let in all the light the dull November sky could spare ; painters and paint-cans had been superseded by petticoats and

pails ; and though the mason-bees and carpenter-bees were hard at work on the outbuildings necessary to house the yeoman's stock and implements, all within and around the domicile was ready to receive its new inmates, or would be in a day or two.

Michael had waited for this ; so now he shook hands with Mr. Latham at the griffin-guarded gate, and rode away home, to prepare for the weighty business of removal ; bearing with him Mrs. Latham's invitation, repeated at his departure by her son.

“ Well, mother,” said George Latham on his return to the Lodge, “ has not everything gone on bravely ? Only think, in spite of his known antipathies, Mr. Ford has slept beneath our roof, and, more than all, promised to bring Alice hither. Alice, dear Alice !” The latter ejaculation was addressed to no one in particular, and spoken in a sort of dreamy ecstacy, as he nursed one leg across the other, clasping with both hands the upper knee, swaying gently backwards and forwards on his chair the while, and gazed intently into the clear red fire, glowing like his own heart.

Accustomed to these moods, the fine old lady continued her spinning—not then a menial employment—in silence ; the monotonous hum of the polished wheel not breaking the stillness, but drowsily filling the ear of the musing man. For some time he sat thus ; then starting to his feet abruptly, paced the

wide room from side to side, talking all the while in the exuberance of young hope. "I shall bless a November fog for ever, since it brought her father here!" (The pronoun referred to a noun understood if not expressed.) "And I may bless you, dear mother, for your womanly tact in offering a comfortable refuge to the ladies at such a juncture. Nothing could have been better. He could not refuse."

"I did no more than my duty, my son. I must own, too, that I lost sight for a while of your possible wishes, and acted solely on the inspiration of the moment, feeling the unpleasantness and discomfort inseparable from such a change of home, and chattels squandered. I never myself witnessed such a removal, and hope I never may. From the dear old house in which my father was born, and since died, I married and came hither, to another ancestral home, prepared to receive me, the bride, more than forty years ago. Still, I can imagine the misery of an entrance into a strange empty house (with an ill name), in a strange neighbourhood, with food to buy or unload, chairs, tables, beds, linen, in fact every useful or essential thing far out of reach; and so, with this picture before my mind, common decency prompted the invitation, not any thought of my love-sick son."

"Say, rather, some good angel prompted you. Do you not see that this not only renews my acquaintance with dear Alice, but establishes one with the whole

family! Oh, mother, I do thank you!" and he turned towards her as he spoke, with clasped hands, and his handsome face beaming with delight. " You may well call me love-sick," continued he, " I know I am, and you, my only confidant, know it too. Kind friend, true counsellor, patient listener, my confidence in you has been the safety-valve which has kept my heart from bursting these two dreary years; and now, in the renewed hope of meeting once more the girl I have loved so long; meeting her openly, with her father's knowledge, I own I am elated beyond control."

A mournful expression stole over the old lady's face as she watched the sanguine lover pace the room with light quick steps, and thought how terrible to him would be a sudden disappointment, and how unlikely it was the schoolgirl should retain the loving memories stamped so indelibly on the elder mind of the young man.

" George," said she, after a long pause, " how old was Miss Ford when she left Chester?"

" About sixteen, mother."

" And how long had you known her?"

" Not more than a year to speak to her; but I had watched her every Sunday for the twelve months before I left Mr. Twemlow's, when she was but a child, and I not seventeen. But you know all this, my dear mother, why ask these questions?"

" Sit down, my son, and I will tell you. I sought

to recall to your mind how very young and inexperienced Miss Ford must have been when you saw her last ; how *very* young when first you met ; and how possible (I do not say probable) it is that her girlish fancy may have faded or changed. It is possible, too, that another suitor, living nearer, seeing her frequently, may have effaced the memory of her school-day attachment, and I would prepare you for such a contingency."

Every particle of colour gradually faded from George Latham's face as his mother proceeded ; and he sat there with white lips, rigid and pulseless, as the dread picture of the *possible*, nay, probable, was placed before him. In all his dreams no thought of change had come ; and now, like the leaden hand of Fate, it crushed him. But not for long ; faith and hope uprose again, and the icy terror melted in the sunshine. Again he rose, and paced the room with quick impatient strides, giving his varying thoughts impetuous utterance.

" I dare not think this, mother, it would kill me ! I may have been a fool to trust my life on so frail a thread as a schoolgirl's constancy ; but young as Alice was, her character was formed, decision sat on lip and brow, and truth undimmed shone in her clear brown eye. I know she loved me *then*, and I will trust she loves me now."

" Had she ever *told* you so ?"

“Never in words: but look, and tone, and blush; joy at meeting, sorrow at parting, timorous trust, all, all spoke eloquently the girl’s unschooled affection! I could not bind her by a promise; every principle of integrity forbade it. If we met in secret it was the secret of circumstance, not connivance. Unknown to her father, without his sanction, I could not have led so young and trusting a girl into an engagement! But that she loved me, I never had a doubt till now, and now—the bare suggestion wrings my heart! I will not think of it!” and he once more resumed his seat, and looked into the fire with painful thought in every curve of his weary looking face.

As he sat down, the old lady arose and came forward, her black velvet train sweeping after her as she moved. Laying one hand on his shoulder lightly, she bent down, until the smooth bands of her silvery hair rested against his jetty curls, now disordered by the impatient hand that had swept them back from his throbbing temples. “George,” said she, calmly, yet soothingly, “you are too impulsive, too apt to let your heart outrun your head; you are elated without reason—are depressed by shadows! If you acted from reason and principle two years ago, how is it that after these two years’ trial to discipline your heart, a word of reason affrights you now? In all this time, in your numberless conversations with me, you have spoken of Miss Ford as a something almost unattain-

able, only to be won by the uprooting of family prejudices, and I ever thought hopelessness lay at the root of your plans to win her, and that in time the fire would die out for want of fuel. I grieve to find I am mistaken—that the reason and good sense on which I depended have been only of the head, and at variance with the heart. Is it possible that I have held the key only to half your heart, and the rest is locked and barred?"

"Mother, I have withheld nothing from you. I did regard my love as something hopeless; I felt distance, isolation, my name and lineage, all were barriers to my very approach, and I strove against my hopes. Suddenly these barriers were thrown down, as if by magic, and my heart leaped with delight at the new prospect. In the midst of my joy, you thrust before me the frozen image of a cold love, the only cruel possibility I had never contemplated, and you saw the revulsion!"

"Yes, but I spoke only of the *possibility*. A woman's memory is as tenacious as man's. I sought to guard you against illusive hopes—not to affright with chimerical fears. Let us hope for the better. If Miss Ford be all you say—as good and true as she is beautiful—and worth the winning, I wish you 'God speed' with all my heart, and bid you remember 'There is a Providence that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we may.' "

" Well, we shall see ; impulsive I may be, but not volatile—love-sick I may be, but not imbecile—fearful, but not unjust ; and I will trust my clear-eyed Alice till I learn my fate from her own lips."

" That is as it should be. Conduct me to the dining-room, my son, the dinner-bell rings."

## CHAPTER VIII.

## OLD HEARTHS AND YOUNG HEARTS

WITH his last ride from Chester fresh in his mind, it is not to be wondered that Michael hurried through his dinner at the Blue Posts, and having carefully examined his pistols and Tony's shoes before starting, rode on at a good round pace, neither stopping at inn nor hostel till Delamere Forest was left behind, and himself safe at the door of the Blue Cap, Sandiway. Here, without dismounting, he called for a glass of the famous Hollands he had tasted there some weeks before. The woman who came to the door, in evident trepidation, denied their possession of such liquor, but Michael, knowing the contrary, persisted in his demand. Hearing a dispute, the landlord came forward, and after a close examination of the horseman, whispered to her, "He's one o' Mester Yawood's friends ; you needn't be afeart !" and aloud, "I think you be the gentleman as Mester Yawood brought here a' blood an' dust t'other week ; here, sir, is the liquor ;

we dar'na bring it out for all the folks as come, as it's not exactly down in a'r licence ; but anny friend o' Mr. Yawood's is welcome to ought 'i th' house."

"Thank you," said Michael, diluting the spirits with water ; "I believe Mr. Heywood to be one of my very good friends, and, it appears, a very useful one too. Good afternoon," and he returned the empty glass to the man with payment for his draught.

"There is really something very peculiar and winning about Mr. Heywood," said he to himself, as he rode away ; "every one seems to like him. He is a favourite in the commercial room at the Blue Posts ; the upholsterer, on his mere introduction, took my large order, and executed it without asking bond, or reference, or advance ; all the people at the farm are captivated with him ; and even this rude publican is willing to put himself in jeopardy only to serve one of Mr. Heywood's friends. So, no wonder that I, whom he has served so well, should admire and esteem him. A capital match it will be for our Alice—not on the score of money altogether (for I dare say we could reckon guinea for guinea) ; but I can see he is a man of principle and feeling, amiable and obliging, over head and ears in love with the girl, and an extraordinary man of business. A little too dressy, perhaps ; but then he is not a country gentleman. He must be very inflammable, for he took fire at first sight of Alice : and of her being in love, there cannot be a

question." (Right there, Mr. Ford : the question is not, is she in love, but with whom?) "Very honourable of him to speak to me first, very honourable and very respectful. I'd kick any man out of my house who dared to make love to my daughter without asking my consent!" (Were you consulted *first*, sapient Mr. Ford?) "I wish he had not tied me down to ask Ailsie no questions. Twenty times a day it's on the tip of my tongue to ask the girl what she thinks of him, and to set her mind at rest about my knowledge of the case, and my approval. Perhaps it's as well after all, for if he has not yet made a positive declaration to her, *she* would not be over well pleased at being consulted last, whatever her love might be. However, I've made the promise, and I suppose must keep it. I hope he will release me before long, for I cannot endure to see the dear child moping as she does. I wonder if Heywood will come down before December fair? We shall be gone before then. I'd ride over to Manchester and give him an agreeable surprise, if I had not so much business on hand. Now, Tony," said he, aloud, "splash through the brook ;—here we are at the gate. Dick! Dick!"

Many breaks and pauses had occurred in the course of this soliloquy ; there had been nods and brief salutations to people on the road ; but with all these gaps it had filled his mind from Sandiway to Ford brook.

And now Dick came, and wife and daughter, and

there was much kissing and much questioning, and refreshing tea for the traveller when the welcomes were over.

"Who do you think has been here while you were away, Michael?" asked his wife, after a while.

"Bradwell, I suppose, to see about the lease and hurry us off?"

"Oh yes, he has been here once or twice, but I don't mean him. What do you say to Mr. Heywood?"

"Mr. Heywood, indeed! and has he been here? I was thinking of him as I came along. And what has he got to say, Ailsie?"

"Nothing more than usual," replied she, colouring to the roots of her hair from a variety of conflicting emotions, little comprehended by the observers; and her father, compassionating her seemingly timid confusion, did not press the subject.

"When did Mr. Heywood come, Margaret? and how long did he remain?"

"He came yesterday morning, and went away in the evening. I could not prevail upon him to stay; he said he had just returned from a long journey, and could not resist the impulse to ride over and see us."

"Pretty strong impulse that which brings a handsome, dashing young fellow more than twenty miles to spend a day at a farmhouse, eh, Ailsie?"

"Young, father! why Mr. Heywood is thirty, or more. I don't call *him* young!" said she, evading the question. "He may be handsome and dashing both, is good-looking enough, but handsome is that handsome does!" continued she, somewhat scornfully.

"Heyday, Miss Alice, what has Mr. Heywood done that is *not* handsome? I think his conduct towards me has been handsome in the extreme, and to you also. Ah, well, I see he has offended your ladyship by riding off again in such a hurry! Ne-*ver* mind—girl—he's none the worse for minding his business. *I* only like him the better for it. Idleness is the root of all evil. Give me the man that will stick to his business for a son-in-law, before any fine gentleman too proud to work. Labour ennobles the man—not lands, nor titles!" said Michael, emphatically. "Alice, go and bring my pipe and tobacco out of the kitchen, and Toby Fillpot at the same time," continued he, in a different tone; and Alice, glad of an opportunity to escape from the room, obeyed with alacrity.

"Margaret," asked he, as soon as the door was closed, "what has occurred between Alice and Mr. Heywood? You don't think they've had a quarrel already, do you?"

"No, I should think not. I saw no difference in her until you spoke of his coming here for the day."

"Ah, young girls are never satisfied! Here, a fine

fellow leaves his business, and wastes a couple of days that he may spend one with her, and she becomes pettish because he does not waste a week, I suppose. Ah well ! he'll make it all right when he comes down to the Grange. What do you think, Margaret?"

" I have not thought much about it, but no doubt your view of the matter is the right one. You know Alice is very different to me, and I cannot judge her moods from my own."

" That indeed she is, my quiet amiable little mouse. I don't think you ever showed signs of pettishness or wilfulness, however much I tried you ;" and the husband drew his wife towards him, and kissed her with a tenderness which told his appreciation of the mildness and self-abnegation of her character.

" Peggy, take a pipe to my father, and the tobacco-box, and give me Toby Fillpot, I will draw the ale."

Toby Fillpot, be it understood, was the name of a jug then in very general use, representing a hollow old gentleman of rotund proportions, with curly wig and three-cornered hat, a pipe in one hand and mug of frothing ale in the other, sometimes manufactured of earthenware, coloured to life (crockery life), sometimes as that was, of brown and buffstone-ware, and his capacity was about a pint ; but Toby Fillpots varied in size, and this was decidedly a juvenile Toby.

" Yo'r sweetheart's thinking on you, miss," said

Peggy, as Alice returned with the foaming ale, “ yo’r apron’s come untied, yo’ll stumble o’er it if yo’ dunna mind.”

“ Is he, Peggy? I should like to know the individual. I have to find my sweetheart yet.”

“ Oi think oi could foind him for yo, Miss Ailce ; at least oi could guess at his name without a yeap o’ trouble, an oi think *ya wood* na ha’ much,” and the girl chuckled at her own feeble attempt at wit. “ But he looked in a peck o’ trouble last night afore he went : he looked as if he thought sorely too much on yo’ for his comfort. Oi felt quite sorry for him loike. Oi could na ha sarved Deack as yo’re sarving him, oi’m sure ; an’ Deack’s nougħt but a country lad.”

“ Peggy, you mean well, I dare say, but your tongue outruns your discretion ; in future, set a watch on your own words, but do not attempt to watch either my movements or those of my father’s guests.” So saying she swept from the kitchen with as much offended dignity as the office of waitress permitted, leaving Peggy to digest the rebuke as best she might.

She found her father and mother discussing the preparations necessary for their immediate removal, in the course of which the latter remarked, “ It will be very uncomfortable for us at first. Don’t you think we had better stay in Northwich a day, or in Chester, for the waggons will be longer on the road

than we shall. It would be so very awkward to alight at the Grange, and not have a chair to sit on."

"Oh dear, I forgot, that reminds me I have an invitation for all three of us down there."

"An invitation, father, from whom?" said Alice, starting forward—then as involuntarily shrinking out of observation behind Michael's chair, as one name flashed across her mind.

Well, child, from a most unlikely quarter. Margaret, I spent one night at Latham Lodge ; and Mrs. Latham, a stately old lady, most courteously and cordially invited us all there, until the Grange was put into order. I thought it very kind of her, considering the old feud between the families ; and accepted it, for I don't wish to bear malice against those who have themselves done no wrong ; any more than I would shut up the old house, because the bricks and boards could not prevent a crime. Why don't either of you speak ? Does not the arrangement suit you ?"

"Yes, yes, Michael, I dare say it is a good arrangement ; but, but——"

"But what? How you hesitate. Shall I write and decline?"

"Oh, dear, no ; only I *was* startled, Michael, I own, to think we should rest in the house of a Latham before our own. But you are always right, dear husband ; and I dare say it was very silly of me. What is your opinion, Alice?"

"Oh," replied Alice, with a strong effort to conceal her too visible satisfaction, "I think the arrangement admirable. The prospect of sitting down on a floor in the empty Grange, or on our pillions waiting disconsolately for our baggage-waggons, has haunted me more than the Grey Lady is likely to do. I am sure I am very much obliged to Mrs. Latham for removing so dreadful a contingency; and will drop her my very best curtsey for her sensible proposal."

"Well, go to bed now, child, and to-morrow be up with the lark, there is much to be done. Good night."

"Good-night, father; good-night, mother;" and having kissed them both she turned away with a lighter heart than she had felt for some time."

"Oh, by the bye, Alice," said Michael abruptly, as she stood in the doorway, "young Mr. Latham said he knew you, or had seen you, or something of the kind."

"Did he?" gasped she, without turning round.  
"Yes, I believe I have seen him once or twice."

"Ah, I thought you had not much remembrance of him. Good-night, love."

"Good-night!" again, and she was gone to the blissful solitude of her own room, and had locked herself in to secure herself from possible intrusion. Ah, conscious heart, when was the privacy of that room invaded?"

Who in the flushed, and panting, and excited girl, who closed the door of her chamber in the tunnel-like passage, would have recognised the cold and decided woman who had repulsed Mr. Heywood's advances the day before?

She sat down, clasped her white hands in a sort of ecstacy, rose suddenly, paced the room, sat down again, rose again, and then after two or three turns round the room, threw herself on her knees with her face on a chair, and sobbed her excitement down. Her mind was in a complete whirl ; the quiet current of her life had been suddenly disturbed ; pebbles, small in themselves, thrown into the stream had ruffled the surface with concentric circles, now meeting and blending in confusing lines ; but sunshine lit the waters, and they danced in the warm beam. A phantasmagoria of events and contingencies played fitfully before her dazzled senses. Mr. Heywood's advent and passionate proposals, her father's prominent sanction of his suit, her debt of gratitude, her strong antipathies, the dread of her father's displeasure, her own secret, the attachment she dared not reveal, the breakdown of her sire's old prejudices, the hope of meeting ; the fear of meeting, for would not conscious faces tell all, too soon for safety ? but oh, the bliss of meeting, by *his* mother's wish, and something whispered—by *his* also.

Long after sleep had sealed every other eyelid in

the house—long after her candle had burned down in the socket—she sat there on the floor, smiling and sighing by turns, but all the perceptions of her position sufficing to extinguish the light of happiness kindled in her heart by her father's promise to Mrs. Weston.

"Wax to receive and marble to return," was the law of Miss Fort, with strong inflections, gentle reprobation, and generous sympathies. She was warm and pliant to receive impressions, which subsequent reason and resolution tempered to soberness. Few fine impressions were, however, cast in the mould of her free mind, for a clear and penetrating judgment guided her impulses, and the friar's spear tested actions and motives; and the veil of falsehood fell before the light of truth in her dark brown eyes.

By this strong perspective faculty may be traced the fact, that notwithstanding her frankness, her aversion to hypocrisy or mystery, she had no confidence. Other old lights had their loves and friendships, confidences and graces, except attachments formed and broken in weeks or months as the case might be, born out in trivial matters of passing interest, she had none—made no confidesses. Little more, although through her residence and the inviolability of her word, she became the depository of all the "great names" and "little histories" in Mrs. Brewster's establishment, even the big-fish groceries counted in

her the trials and struggles and love-story of her life—the life of a poor young lady. But Alice had nothing of importance to confide till her young heart was stirred with the troubling tale of love, and that was too little comprehended by herself to be the subject of idle chat; then, when better understood, too deep and sacred a mystery to breathe in common ears. He had not questioned her concerning her emotions, could she volunteer to strangers the confession he had not sought, but which she felt was needless. And so Alice left school with her year-old secret, longing to seek her mother's counsels. But the child had outgrown the mother; the character of the one stood out in bold relief, outlined in fulsome colours; the other displayed a flat insipid dab of neutral tint. Strong and self-reliant the one—weak and dependent the other; trusting, fond and loving both. But the woman loved like a child, and the girl loved like a woman.

Whatever links of affection bound her to this gentle mother—and they were strong, as all her feelings were—confidence, such confidence as a timid maiden, no only child, would pour into the listening ear and heart of a sympathizing parent, were here impossible. Quick to perceive and reflect, she felt she must rely upon herself to bear the beating of her heart unconfessed, unadvised; and trust in Providence to clear impediments from her path. Her father's

known prejudices barred communion with him, on the one sole topic ever uppermost in her thought ; and even if her honest frankness might have induced Alice to burden her mother with the weight of her secret, dread of consequences sealed her lips, for Mrs. Ford could not have retained it many days. She had no secrets from her husband, few opinions he did not frame or fashion, could not have thought with, or for her daughter apart from him ; and so it was that Alice, whilst feeling that silence was dishonesty, and yearning for the loving sympathy she dared not claim, lest confession should thrust the newer but not weaker love out of her reach for ever, sat in darkness and silence, nursing in alternations of mood her secret of love, and fear, and hope.

"Up with the lark," however, was Alice next morning, with a carol as light and blithe, or rather up before the lark, for daylight is tardy in November, and that month was far advanced ; but up Alice was by candle-light, stripping hangings from beds and windows, folding and packing linen and draperies, emptying closets, and stowing their contents in chests and boxes, packing glass and china in wiskets and hampers with sweetly-scented hay, flitting here and there like a fairy, one of the housewifely fairies of olden time.

Michael might not have hurried away from Ford-brook so fast, but Mr. Bradwell, the in-coming tenant,

was anxious to enter without delay, for agricultural reasons, and the same motives might operate in a measure with the former.

All that could have been in readiness on the farm was ready when Mr. Ford returned home, and in a few days the interior was stripped and bare, filled with packages of all sorts and sizes ; hay and straw littered the once neat rooms, dust lay in closets and corners, on shelves, and floors, and staircases, save where muddy footmarks had trampled out the dust with an intricate patterning of hob-nails, and clogs, and patten-rings, and large heavy-soled boots, and toe-and-heel impression of a small light step, coming and going hither and thither up the stairs, along passages, across the rooms, one mark obliterating another, until dirt disguised the floors, leaving no trace of the remarkable neatness and cleanliness which had, as it were, embalmed the house for years on years.

Sadly Margaret contemplated the disorder and bustle attending the breaking up of old associations ; every rude step trampling over the once white boards seemed trampling on her heart ; her quietness sank almost into melancholy. Surveying the discomfort and confusion of her long-orderly home, she could not realize that the change was for the better. It was *change*, and change to her was revolution. The days and weeks had hitherto gone by in a calm round of

wifely and domestic duties, the routine unbroken save by the little incidents which made, in fact, part of the routine: she had not even changed a woman servant for many years; the hirings were to her of little note, for Peggy and Betty had grown to womanhood in her service, and her other assistants were generally wives of the hinds born on their lands; and now all was change, nothing but change. Even Peggy's frequent iteration and reiteration of the astounding information that her "feet itched till she couldn't abide, a sure sign she was goin' to tread on strange ground, an' her left eye itched and she was sure to cry," struck her, not with a sense of the ludicrous, but an inclination to join in the probable "cry," as she felt how "strange" to her would be the Grange, without the cousin she had known there. Not being demonstrative, she said nothing of what she felt on the rending of old ties; it was only perceptible in the increased gravity and quietness of her demeanour amidst the general bustle, and contrasted with the blithe tones and activity of her well pleased daughter. But Michael saw it, and was glad when the carts and waggons were loaded with their household stuff, hay and provender for the horses, and ready to depart.

Betty and another woman rode on boxes under the tilt of the foremost waggon, the former having in charge a mysterious basket confided to her by Peggy,

who ran after the receding vehicle, screaming out, “Dunna yo’ forget to carry th’ basket into th’ house, an’ empty it afore a cord’s loosed or a straw carried in, or there’ll come no luck to th’ Grange ! Now moind and dunna forget ;” and she cast an old shoe after the party for “luck.”

An escort of three or four labourers accompanied the carts, partly for protection on the road, partly to assist in unloading at their journey’s end. And soon Dick brought round to the trellised porch two horses with side-saddles for Mrs. Ford and Alice, and a stout brown mare saddled for himself, with a pillion behind for Peggy. Tears, the first she had shed for many years, rolled down the gentle matron’s cheek, as she kissed and embraced her husband again and again, bidding him farewell as though she were loath to depart, while Michael tenderly tried to soothe her, chiding her gently for her “foolish fears,” under the impression that dread of the journey, or grief at leaving him behind in the dismantled house, caused her tears. Not the first time by any means that his penetration had been at fault.

Alice kissed him pleasantly and cheerfully, adjusting her riding-dress, and, bidding Peggy, who was sobbing for companionship, “Be quiet, and let Dick place her on the pillion without any nonsense,”—was the first to turn from the old homestead, though there she had been born, and ride through the gate ; there was

a meeting in perspective for her before which old associations paled and faded.

In accordance with previous arrangements, Michael had written to acquaint Mrs. Latham with the probable day she might expect Mrs. and Miss Ford, and also with a slight change in his plans, the necessity for his own stay at Fordbrook, until the return of carts and carters should enable him to remove such of his implements, live stock, grain, hay, &c., as he had not disposed of to the new tenant, thanking her also very graciously for her timely and thoughtful hospitality. He likewise said, he thought it necessary to send two of his men servants with them for protection across Delamere Forest, but one would quit them at Tarvin and return, the other leave his wife and daughter at the lodge, and pass on with the maid to the Grange, not remain to encroach on her great kindness.

To every one but Margaret this arrangement gave entire satisfaction ; she, so long accustomed to the presence of her husband, to think and act for her, felt how utterly incompetent she should be to direct and arrange matters at their new residence without him ; but she heard the letter read with an acquiescent sigh, and a hope that Alice would be able to decide on the proper disposition of furniture, or servants' rooms, with other matters of like importance, or non-importance. To Alice it gave the assurance of meeting George Latham for the first time after their long separation,

without the embarrassment of her father's presence, and once more within the week she felt that absence a relief.

But to George Latham the missive gave delight unspeakable. He had shared her dread of meeting under her father's eye ; there would not be the same embargo on his speech or looks, unless Mrs. Ford should be shrewd and keen, and nothing which had dropped from Alice had ever led him to that conclusion. It would only be common courtesy to ride to Chester and meet them. Mr. Peover would know the inn Mr. Ford put up at ; or, failing that, he would post on and meet them on the Tarvin road. Did not his mother think it a capital plan ? His mother thought that her son's eye looked brighter than it had done since the day she damped his fervid hopes with the prudential suggestions of age, and smilingly told him so ; assuring him he could not well do less than join the ladies and escort them home. It would be an assurance of welcome.

How much more fastidious in his attire was George Latham on that frosty morning, December the second, 1790, than he had been for many, many months ! How many shirts were examined and rejected before the one was found with frills to his mind ! More than one neckcloth was cast aside, before the folds lay rightly, or the lace-trimmed ends fell in desirable folds. The buckskin riding-breeches had to

be spotless, and after he had buttoned them at the knees, he tied and untied the bunches of ribbon above and below the buttons more than once before the bows satisfied him. His vest was short in the waist and of sober hue, and, together with his dark blue large-collared coat, with very long sparrow-tails—an innovation of the young bucks on the wide-skirted garment in general use—proved that, if not quite such a beau as Mr. Heywood, the young squire had an eye to fashion, though he might not follow its extreme vagaries. Thus he wore the general top-boots, not the exclusive riding-boot pointed on the calf like a Hessian boot, wrong side before—and his top-boots that morning were a special trouble to his man Tom, who declared he “didn’t know what had gotten measter, he wur so uncommon hard to please.” How much more carefully he brushed and trimmed his night-black curls (for he wore no fashionable wig to disfigure him), and placed his wide-brimmed hat, with buckle and broad band, upon the glossy curls, than was at all requisite! The long ride, at the pace his heart kept, and, consequently, his horse, soon shook hat and curls from their jaunty position, though that did not at all interfere with his good looks.

Whatever he might think of himself as he gave the final touch to his cravat and ruffles, his mother watched him down the drive with a consciousness that he was as fine, manly, and handsome a young fellow as any

Miss Ford was likely to meet, either in Chester, Northwich, or elsewhere.

He had been in such haste, that, when he reached the Blue Posts, there were no signs of the travellers, so he took the road Michael had travelled recently, seeing neither the rows, nor the houses, nor the East-gate, but in the far-off distance the chestnut hair, brown eyes, straight nose, round chin, and broad forehead of the girl of sixteen he knew two years before ; and conned over in his mind how to address her when they met, and her probable reply.

The Eastgate had been left behind a mile, when he descried in the actual distance a party of travellers, whom he judged, from their numbers, to be those he sought : the keen frosty air had braced his nerves and quickened his pulse, but the sight of the nearing horsewomen caused his heart to beat with a wildness which owed nothing to the atmosphere.

To Alice, who had never seen him but on foot, to whom his very garb was new, who deemed him miles away awaiting her, the approach of the advancing horseman signified nothing ; she was pre-occupied thinking of him, picturing their meeting at the portals of Latham Lodge, when he raised his hat and spoke —spoke to the mother first, for he dared not trust his trembling lips to accost Alice, and felt it as he rode up : and well for her that he did ; his voice and features were not changed, and the rapid recognition

chased the blood from her cheeks and lips, only to rush back with double force and make her sick and dizzy. But, in such emergencies, woman recovers her presence of mind quickly, and so did Alice ; and when, after his self-introduction to Mrs. Ford, and a commonplace salutation, he turned to her—she had regained her composure.

Leaning forward from his saddle, he extended his hand and said, audibly, “Miss Ford, I have much pleasure in renewing our brief acquaintance, and hope I see you well ;” but his deep blue eyes looked into hers, and their language was, “I trust you love me still.”

And, as she laid her trembling palm in his, and “ thanked him, and was quite well,” her eyes replied, in language quite as legible, “ I do.”

Then he turned his horse’s head, and, taking a position between mother and daughter, explained that Mrs. Latham had thought it desirable he should ride forward, to render what assistance he could as escort and guide.

“Had Mr. Ford accompanied you, I should not have presumed to intrude, but the letter he favoured us with gave me reason to think I might be of some little service; may I hope that my presence is not unacceptable?”

“I am sure, Mr. Latham, I am quite grateful to you; I am not much used to travelling; have not

gone five miles from home without my husband since I was married, nor before that without my Uncle Luke, so that I have felt quite timorous during this journey. I felt as if a highwayman lurked behind every tree skirting the road in Delamere Forest, and your presence is quite reassuring."

"I am delighted to hear it. And Miss Ford, I trust I am not intruding upon her?"

"Certainly not, quite the reverse;" commonplace question and commonplace answer; but the effort to utter them, and the searching glances of the blue eyes, the timid, downcast looks of the brown orbs, conveyed meanings not found in the words, and the two hearts rightly interpreted their utterances.

"At the Blue Posts, George assisted the ladies to dismount; and, as he lifted Alice from her horse, unobserved by the bystanders, he held her to his breast for a single instant with an involuntary pressure she long remembered. There they remained for rest and refreshment about an hour, when the horses were brought round and the journey was resumed. As they rode under the ominously frowning Northgate, Mrs. Ford remarked to Mr. Latham, "I never see or think of that gate without a shudder. Uncle Luke used to dilate on the horrors of its dungeons, and the atrocities committed there, until I was quite appalled; and it is in use as a prison still, I believe?"

"Yes," said Mr. Latham, "and is still as terrible to contemplate."

"It grieves me to think there are criminals deserving such captivity, and judges and juries capable of condemning them to it," added Mrs. Ford compassionately.

Then the conversation digressed, Alice saying little; feeling, as did George, the restraint on lips and eyes insupportable. But, though both were changed outwardly, his frame more firmly knit, his face more marked and masculine: her form expanded and developed, inches added to her height, the girl grown a lovely woman; and, though they felt the mutual change, neither dreaded change of heart—and change of home was blessedness.



## CHAPTER IX.

THINE !

LATHAM LODGE was a massive red-brick building, dating from the reign of Queen Anne, strengthened by rustic masonry around and above the foundation, and with rustic quoins at every angle, around each window and doorway: of these, the central quoins displayed in bold relief faces with expressions as varied as the passions which agitate humanity; but other ornaments there were none, solidity rather than beauty having been the object of the architect. A double flight of steps, branching right and left, with an iron balustrade in front, gave access to the main entrance, raised much above the level ground. A broad firm carriage-drive swept round the smoothly-shaven lawn, sparkling with hoar frost, and down some distance to the heavy wooden gates, studded thickly with octagonal nails. The handle of a sonorous bell was here, to intimate the arrival of strangers who sought admission; but that day the

gates were flung open, ready to admit the most welcome visitors that ever crossed the Latham threshold.

Raised on a somewhat conical elevation, the house was visible across the country for some distance above the foliage in summer ; and, when the boughs were bare of all but frost and icicles, the tall dark building was conspicuous for miles. The drive was consequently steep, and the garden not a dead level, but raised terrace above terrace, with communicating flights of steps here and there. Sombre yews, box, and other evergreens, cut into quaint and fantastic devices, surrounded the house, giving an aspect of verdure from the windows even in the chilliest season.

To Margaret the place was old as the memories of her childhood, and brought those memories thronging back. To Alice all was new, and as she rode along her eye took in all these details, notwithstanding the agitation natural to her situation. She saw too the groom standing by the steps ready to receive their horses ; saw the velvet-train and lace-apron of the stately lady, standing by the open door ; felt again George Latham's sudden clasp, and his whispered words, "Welcome, dear Alice, to my home ;" heard the order given for Dick and Peggy to be taken round to the servants' hall, and hospitably entertained ; was conscious that Madame Latham kissed her on the forehead, with many a kindly word of greeting ; conscious of her own low curtsey and in-

audible reply ;—but there was a dreaminess about the whole she strove in vain to dispel.

The old lady herself conducted her guests to the respective chambers prepared for their reception ; prepared with a delicate appreciation of their probable desires and requirements, and indicative of a refined taste and clear perception. To that discernment may be traced the fact, that though she had summoned Phœbe from the village to wait upon her visitors, Alice especially, she herself became conductress of the young girl, and left her alone at the door of her room, conscious that she needed solitude and quiet to regain her self-possession.

And she did require to be alone, and again was thankful for the temporary repose. George Latham's whispered words were in her ears, his touch was on her waist ; never before had he so clasped her. The love he felt had been implied, not spoken, in the long ago ; and though she had felt and seen it through the medium of her own heart, he had been to her openly but as a guardian brother. She saw the change, and trembled.

After a brief space given to collect her scattered thoughts, she rapidly divested herself of her travelling-dress ; with ice-cold water laved hands and face copiously, bathed her temples with Hungary water (provided on the toilet-table), and slowly descended the capacious staircase. In the marble-paved

hall stood George Latham, apparently waiting for her, as he advanced quickly, and, offering his hand, conducted her to the room in which they had been received, and closing the door, led her to a sofa placed near a cheerful wood fire.

Neither Madam Latham nor Mrs. Ford were there, and Alice glanced around nervously, as half-conscious a crisis was at hand, and she would fain have escaped.

But he had willed otherwise. He felt his false position and resolved to end it ; felt it would be charity to her as to himself, if that she loved him, and if *not*, why *then*—but anything rather than suspense. So he seated himself on the sofa by her side, and without one word of trifling prelude, said, in a low clear voice, whose faintest accents fell on her ear like music, “Alice, you are greatly changed ; you left Chester a slight girl, you return a full-grown woman, if possible more beautiful than ever. Nay, do not turn your head away. I will not compliment again ; but truth comes bubbling to my lips, and I must utter it. Alice, dear Alice,” and here his voice sank lower and trembled greatly, “for two long lonely years I have cherished the memory of the girl you were, with a feeling akin to worship. I had loved you long before we parted, but you were so young, honour forbade love’s utterance. Now, you return, a woman, old enough to know your own heart and mine, and I cannot longer restrain my

impulses. Twice this day, impelled by feelings stronger than my will, I pressed you to me ; I could not help it, Alice ; do you forgive me ?”

No word from Alice ; she sat with her head averted and bent down, to hide the tears streaming down her flushed cheeks, but had no voice to reply.

“ Alice, can you not forgive me ? have I offended you ?” and he took her right hand in his, passing his left arm around her waist. “ Alice, you do not answer me. Oh God ! I cannot have deceived myself ! Alice, one word—but one !”

A sob, no word, as she withdrew her hand, and hid her still averted face ; and he, in agony intense, slid on one knee by her side, the better to catch a glimpse of that shrouded countenance.

“ Alice, dear Alice, I cannot endure this torture ! My mother suggested doubts, which then I scorned, but now—now, they return with threefold force ! Am I to think you cannot love me, and pitying friendship withholds the dreadful truth ? For mercy’s sake speak, these sobs distract me ! I shall go wild ! Fool that I was to let my impetuosity master my discretion. Alice, I *must* have an answer ! Can you not *love* me ? And as he spoke he gently removed one veiling hand, looking anxiously in her eyes the while.

The glance accomplished what the words could not ; with a short, sharp cry she flung her arms

around his neck, and gasped, “I do love you dearly, George.” His wild delight it is impossible to picture: the revulsion from the dread occasioned by her silence was so intense, that, after straining her convulsively to his heart, the impassioned man sank down, and positively wept.

A man’s tears, whether of joy or sorrow, are terrible to behold, and it was Alice’s turn then to feel alarmed. “George, dear George,” whispered she, timidly, “do not weep thus; you terrify me. I would have spoken sooner, but I could not. George, for my sake, calm yourself; if you *do* love me, spare me the pain of having caused these tears!” and her voice took the very slightest touch of wounded pride.

But his sudden outburst of tears was over: with a tender light in his blue eyes, he drew her closer to him, laid her sunny head upon his shoulder, and pressed upon her lips love’s solemn seal, that kiss which lives through the memories of a life—love’s *first*.

Too blest for speech, they sat together thus, unmindful of the waning daylight, forgetful of all the world but each other, and their new happiness. Suddenly Alice remembered her mother, and the fear of discovery crossed her mind, thought of *his* mother, and maiden shame took possession of her soul.

“Oh, George!” exclaimed she, releasing herself

from his arms. "My mother—yours—I had forgotten them. Oh, what will they think?" and a modest flush crimsoned neck and face.

"Think, my sweet love, no harm, I am sure! My mother, Alice, knows my whole heart; and though she combated my wish to speak to you at once, as being selfish and abrupt, still she knew of it, and will have kept your mother from missing us. However, it does not matter much, my love, she will have to know. We cannot keep our love a secret long, and now or later is all as one."

"Oh, George, how you talk; you forget, you forget! I dread my father knowing!" and she clasped her hands in painful emotion.

"Why, my dearest Alice? He appears one willing to discard prejudice, and blot out feuds; would he not be willing to cement the family rupture with our union?"

"I fear not. Oh, there is something—My mother *will* miss me, and she must not know—at least, not yet."

"Alice, what is this that has blanched your lips, and changed you on the instant?" questioned he, anxiously.

"Dread to lose you, and a terror besides, which I have known but lately. I cannot tell you now; I must go to my mother. Do not look grieved: I will tell you everything when next we are alone! I will

have no secrets from you, George." And she looked up confidingly into his face.

Kissing her fondly but sadly, as another shadow than that of the twilight crept over their faces and hearts, he led her from the room to one where the two elder ladies sat waiting tea.

"Where have you been all this time, Alice?" said Mrs. Ford. "I thought you would never come. And what disorder your hair is in, child. You might have surely dressed it better than that!"

"We have been waiting a summons to tea, in mother's morning room, talking over old school days," replied George, to the first part of her speech, ignoring the second, to spare the dear girl the pain and confusion of a reply; and Mrs. Ford accepted the excuse, and forgot the ruffled hair.

Madam Latham, with a gentleness and tact worthy a younger woman, invited Alice to a seat beside herself, yet next to her son, and somewhat in the shade. She was one of those rare women who never forget their own young days, whose sympathies are ever warm.

"Oh, Miss Ford, my mother has engaged a young person to wait upon Mrs. Ford and yourself while you honour us with your presence, whom you may perhaps remember as a pupil of Miss Briscoe's—Phœbe Horne!"

"Phœbe Horne! Oh, yes, I remember; a smiling,

rosy-cheeked, bright-eyed girl ! She left, I think, about eighteen months before myself. Oh, yes, I remember her, and am greatly obliged to your mother." Alice did not say a maid was unnecessary, or that she was accustomed to wait upon herself, although she thought it.

" Does this young person reside in the neighbourhood ? " asked Mrs. Ford, after a pause for tea-imbibing.

" Yes," responded Madam Latham ; " she is a sort of *protégée* of mine. All my nine girls had died in infancy before George was born, and taking a fancy to the merry motherless girl, I sent her to a good school for a few years, away from the contagion of a public-house. Her father keeps the 'Black Bear,' you may remember it."

" Oh, yes, and the landlord too ; he was a young man newly married when I was last in Shotwick."

" Well, after I thought Phœbe sufficiently educated for her station, I apprenticed her to Mrs. Hopley, the fashionable mantua-maker of Watergate Street, for three years, in order to obviate the necessity for her attendance on a drove of drunken boors."

" Mother," said George, in a tone of slight remonstrance.

" I am right, George ; the uneducated clowns who frequent the Black Bear are nothing better than drunken boors ; and I shall be sorry if the girl chooses

a husband from amongst them That Matthew Spark hangs on her footsteps, I know, and she smiles on him more than I like, for his is a thirsty trade, and I fear he will turn out a sot."

"Matthew Spark's all right, mother, works hard, and does not drink very much, considering his hot work."

"At present he may be all right, George ; but the drinking habits are forming, and I know Phœbe is much too good for him. Mrs. Ford, your cup. I must apologize for conversing on a subject of so little interest to you ; but in my feeling for the young woman, I forgot what was properly due to my guests."

"Alice," said Mrs. Ford, as the repast drew to a close, "have you sent Dick and Peggy on to the Grange ?"

"No, mother, I thought you would have done it ; however, I will do so now, if you think proper. Have you any message for them ?"

"Only to tell Dick he must send, first thing in the morning, the hair trunk in which you packed a change of clothes for us."

"I will accompany you, Miss Ford, to show you the way ; I shall have to send a man with your servants," said George, as he rose and opened the door for her to pass out.

There were long and dim passages to tread in their way to the servants' hall, and they did not seem in any remarkable haste to get there ; nor did it appear to have occurred to them to summon the servants to

take their orders instead of becoming their own messengers. To Alice, accustomed to wait on herself and others, this had not occurred, but to George Latham it had, only he did not care to be precise just then.

There was a flutter in the hall when they entered together, and rapid glances passed from one to another of the men and maids. Dick and Peggy were ready to depart, would remember all about the box, know where to find the beds and bedding, would be sure to secure the Grange doors at night, and so mounted and went away, accompanied by Tom, who had strict and private orders not to take them the way through Shotwick, not to prate of forbidden mysteries (ghosts to wit), and a release from the necessity of seeing them beyond the Griffin gate.

“Dick,” said Peggy that night, in confidential chat as they rode up to the Grange, “I’m a thinkin’ that young Mester Latham ’ill be putting Mester Yawood’s shoulder out. There ’ill be old work at the Grange when Mester Ford comes, and gets wind o’ it. Oi wud na’ stand in her shoen then. He’s taken so moightly wi’ Mester Yawood; but this’n’s younger and likelier than t’other. But yo an’ oi’d best hold our tongues an’ say naught.”

“Right, wench, a still tongue makes a wise head, Oi’ve heared our parson say; an’ least said soonest mended.”

“Oi hope Betty took out that basket first thing,” said

she half aloud as he unbuckled the strap, and lifted her from the pillion.

"Whoi, what's in the basket, yo mak' such a fuss about it?"

"Oi'll tell yo, if yo'll not larf at me ; yo all'ays larf."

Dick promised quietness ; so, with an impressive whisper and a wise nod or two, she confided to him her secret.

"Well, then, there's bread, an' coal, an' salt, food an' fire, an' comfort; and there'll be no luck to the place if they binna the first things in it."

"Thou'rt a silly wench, wi' thy good luck an' ill luck ; whoi thou'rt more suppositious than moi old granny."

Peggy resented this accusation pettishly ; so Dick thereupon, favoured by the screening waggons, kissed her good-humouredly, to "mak' a' reeght," and she, having clambered over sundry outlying packages into the hall, was comforted by finding Betty had been obedient to her behests.

The long ride to one so unaccustomed to the exercise, had given Mrs. Ford a shaking, of which she felt the full effects on the morrow, and, sorely against her will, was compelled to breakfast in bed, and request Alice to go forward to the Grange alone, to order matters there without her that day ; yet she hoped to be less stiff in a few hours.

It is not to be supposed that Alice rejoiced at her

mother's indisposition, however slight, she was too affectionate and kindly for that ; at the same time it must be admitted Mrs. Ford's absence from the breakfast-table removed a weight of restraint from both herself and George Latham. He was alone in the breakfast-room when she entered, and advanced with outstretched arms to meet her ; but she came forward coyly, it was so different, this morning meeting in the clear daylight, from the extorted confession in the dim twilight the evening before. But love's students con their lessons quicker than any, and it needed but the tender touch of his arm and lip to put her timorous bashfulness to flight once more.

Presently Madam<sup>\*</sup> Latham entered the room with a gracious smile and kindly word, and courteous inquiries after her night's repose, and her mother's recovery from the previous day's fatigue ; and as George turned away to place chairs for them, she bent forward, and in an undertone, intended for the ear of Alice only, said, with an assuring pressure of the blushing girl's hand, "Miss Ford, my son has told me of the relation now established between us. I shall be proud to receive you as my daughter, and his wife ! There, my dear, you need not be embarrassed ; it was best we understood each other at once." And she pressed a motherly kiss on the drooping forehead of Alice, who stood there abashed and tongue-tied. But George quickly came to her

relief with a whispered word intended to inspire confidence, as he handed her to a seat. Then servants came in bearing coffee and chocolate, and viands savoury or sweet ; and, as people must eat, whether they love or hate, the repast proceeded not the less pleasantly, perhaps, for the few words which had set Alice partially at ease.

During its progress Alice explained the necessity of her immediate presence at the Grange, and her mother's unfitness to accompany her, adding that Phœbe could go with her as a guide.

"Not Phœbe, but *I* will be your escort Alice, if you will permit," interposed George with a bounding heart. "Will you walk or ride? It is only a mile," added he suggestively.

"Oh walk, by all means; a walk will be delightful this brisk morning. And with you," echoed her beating pulse in a fluttering voice only audible to susceptible ears; yet, strange to say, both mother and son heard it and smiled.

The hair-trunk had been there since daybreak, so Alice in a very short time presented herself equipped for her walk as beseemed the temperature, in warm scarlet cloak, and little foxskin muff, a very necessary appendage on a cold day when mittens left the tender fingers bare. And very pleasant and love-inspiring she looked as she crossed the wide hall with a firm step, her eyes radiant with happiness.

"Mother," said George, with his foot on the step, "I will bring Alice back to dinner if you will have a late one."

"What time, my son?"

"Not earlier than three. Will that suit you, Alice?"

"There will be much to do at the house which servants cannot manage without a director. If it would not occasion too much inconvenience four o'clock would be better."

"Then, four let it be, mother; though, I think, my love, that will be your ordinary tea-time," laughed George as he placed one dear arm within his own, and they crossed the gardens to a side door. "This leads to a path through a plantation of mine, which opens close to the gates of the Grange. It is not much used, but it is nearer, and will obviate the necessity of passing through the village. I suppose you feel perfectly safe with me?"

"Safe, George, what can there be to dread?"

"Nothing, my own love; but the road is lonesome, and has but an indifferent name. Poachers lurk there at times; but I never was molested, and have no fears. I do not think there is a human being in all Shotwick who would injure me or mine."

The path was somewhat gloomy, dark firs and cedars shutting out the light, though oak, and elm, and sycamore.

more were bare and hoary ; but the ground was crisp, and the dry leaves rustled in the breeze or crackled beneath their tread, as they stepped forward cheerfully, his right hand clasping the small fingers resting on his other arm, perchance to keep them warm without the muff. Awhile they chatted lightly, then occurred a long pause, during which thought was busy.

“Alice,” said he, at last, breaking the long silence, “you made me very uneasy yesterday by suggestions of your father’s probable objection to my suit, and allusions to some secret pressing heavily upon you. You promised to reveal this ‘when next alone.’ We are alone, dear love, and now, what is it?” looking fondly beneath her broad straw hat down on her truthful face as he questioned her.

“I shrink from telling you, dear George,” she replied sadly. “I know it will give you pain ;” and she clung closer to him as she added, after a pause, in a lower voice, “I have another suitor, and I fear, I fear, my father favours him.”

“Another suitor!” The young man started as if he had been stung. Then, with a rapid movement, clutched her waist as if he would defy the world to tear her from him.

“Don’t, George, you hurt me.”

“Forgive me, Alice, I did not know what I was doing. Another suitor, and your father favours him !

Oh, my Alice, this is dreadful. But you, you——?” and he looked into her eyes as though he would have read her very soul.

“ Fear not for me, George, I do not love lightly, nor loosely;” and her eye kindled with the light of devotion and determination;” only yourself could thrust me from you now.”

“ And that will never be, never. I would surrender life, but not my love, my Alice.” And his tightening clasp gave impress to his words. “ But who is this dreaded rival?” asked he, with a forced attempt at playfulness, as they resumed the walk interrupted by strong emotion. So Alice related to him all she knew concerning Mr. Heywood, his name and business; his services to her father in Chester and Delamere Forest; her accident in the salt mine; his attention to her then; and his impassioned declaration afterwards. George listened with attention riveted, his varying countenance and brief ejaculations telling the power of the narration upon him; but from the time she commenced until they emerged from the friendly shadow of the darkling trees, he never released her from his clasping arm for an instant, but held her fast, as though he dreaded she would suddenly be snatched away from him.

“ This is the Grange, dear Alice; what do you think of it?”

“ It is a fine picturesque old building; I hope we

may be happy there," and she sighed as if anticipating sorrow.

"Eh, Miss, Ailse, oi'm reeght glad yo'r come; we connan tell where to put a thing!" exclaimed Peggy, as she opened the door for her young mistress. "Th' waggins wor here last neeght, afore Dick an' me comed, and it wor neegh mearn afore they wor a' cleared out."

The hall was then littered with furniture and boxes, and Alice, hastily surveying the ground-floor, gave instructions for the clearance of the heavier articles, in accordance with the known wishes of her father, who had submitted to her a plan of the building, and pointed out the uses of the several rooms, so as to relieve her mother of much thought and trouble.

This difficult and bewildering task she performed with a quickness and precision at which George was surprised. Of her business habits, her domestic qualifications, he knew nothing; but what he saw then convinced him more than ever she was a prize worth winning. As she, accompanied by her esquire, mounted the staircase, Peggy bawled after her, "Two o' them doors is locked, miss; yo' connan get in."

"I have been entrusted by Mr. Peover with the keys of these rooms; they contain a pleasant surprise for you, my Alice."

A pleasant surprise indeed! She had thought of coming into empty or disordered rooms, to arrange

their old-fashioned furniture to the best advantage, and here she stood in an elegant drawing-room, ready prepared for her by the loving kindness of that father whose disputed will she so much dreaded.

“This is the other key, my love ; the chamber is on the right. I will await your return here. It is your own room, Alice.”

Surely her father had crowded kindness upon kindness, and her heart smote her with a sense of ingratitude as she felt rather than knew how soon their opinions and wills would clash. There were tears in her eyes when she rejoined George Latham in the drawing-room, and they flowed freely as he questioned her on their source. She threw aside her hat, sat down beneath the warm light of the crimson draperies, and surveyed the room with a sadness her kind father never contemplated.

“Oh, George ! how can I wilfully grieve so kind a father ?”

“Alice, do you repent so soon your concession to me ? if so, it had been better perhaps that we had never met—better for both ;” and he spoke with undisguised bitterness, the yet unfinished narration ranking in his heart.

“No, George, I do not repent ; but I should be unworthy you, could I regard these evidences of a father’s love, without a pang at the thought I was about to disappoint his hopes.”

"But Alice, love, you are not sure he favours Mr. Heywood?"

"Alas, I am! not only from his own broad hints, but Mr. Heywood's assertion, when the second time he sought the love I could not give."

"If it be true your father loves you so well, my dearest, surely when he found you could not love that man, and that your happiness was linked with mine, he would yield to our entreaties, and give you up to me."

"You do not know my father, George; he will yield nothing but on conviction, and nothing short of a miracle will convince him an opinion or a predilection he has once formed can be wrong! He is inflexible, and will consider me ungrateful, both to Mr. Heywood and himself."

George Latham had stood by her side leaning against the window frame dejectedly, during this unpromising conversation, looking down upon her wistfully, as his prospect of happiness gradually receded. Soon he said abruptly, "What is Mr. Heywood like, Alice?"

"Tall and handsome" (George winced), "wears a periwig, dresses like a beau, is bland and insinuating; but there is something about him, and in his eyes, from which I shrink and shudder," a very audible sigh of relief from her listening lover followed this declaration; and he then asked, "Do you—do you—think he—he really—truly lov—is attached to you?"

stumbling over the word "love" as if it galled him to use it in connection with a possible rival. "He had seen you so short a time—so very short a time," argued he, as if striving to convince himself and her that love was of slow growth.

"I *know* he does, his passion could not be feigned ! His agitation, the beating of his heart as he upheld me in the mi——"

"Hush, Alice !" interrupted he, impetuously ; "for Heaven's sake, hush ! How can I bear to think of you—my own love, in another man's arms—a lover's too ? Oh, Alice, Alice, what if your father should force you to marry this man ?" and he paced the floor wildly, for parental authority was stronger and more awful then than now.

He *cannot* ! our wills may come into sharp collision ; the love and duty of a daughter may war with my love for you, but I should sin against my soul to marry a man I could not love, and I should soon loathe Robert Heywood. I shame to say it !" and as she said this with resolute bearing, she rose ; he, too, stopped in his walk, and came forward, "Alice," said he, with enforced calmness, taking both her hands in his, "Promise me, dearest, that you will be mine—*mine* come what may—in spite of all opposition ! Promise this."

"I cannot, I dare not ; no blessing would hallow such a promise. I will marry no one else, no force

can compel me; but, without parental sanction, I could not marry even you, and," added she, seeing him about to urge her further—"do not force me to think you selfish, by pressing me to promise more; let us trust in Providence to make me your wife some day, and wait in hope and patience." So saying, she laid her head confidingly upon his breast, and looked up into his sorrowful face with such loving, hopeful eyes, no wonder that he held her there, and showered warm kisses on her willing lips, mentally vowing to part with her to no one.

But business had claims as well as love, and so she told him, as she broke, after a while, from his embrace, ran to the harpsichord, and rattled over a light tune to try the tone (and chase his sadness), then hastened from the room bidding him follow, if he knew how to look cheerful and be useful.

And very useful she found him; for though Mr. Peover, with thoughtful consideration, had sent a carpenter down to assist, she found George Latham a much more agreeable, if less skilled, coadjutor in her own proper department. All the men but Dick had gone back with the carts, but he and the carpenter set up bedsteads, moved bureaus, tables, and chests, to their places, while the women unpacked bedding, linen, glass, china, and crockery, under Alice's directions, or bestowed them in closets and cupboards, and her amateur assistant lent a helping hand to anything

Alice wished, or that did not separate him far from herself.

The kitchen (situated, it may be remembered, in the rear of the left wing) had first attention ; and, soon the gaunt old chronicler of time, reared his black body opposite to the fireplace, and between the doors leading to staircase and parlour, and then began to check off minutes and hours with his brazen fingers and staring face and warning voice, so little heeded by the young and merry, so sadly or soberly noted by the anxious or aged ; checked them off as complacently as though it were all one to the old clock whether the minutes were treasured or wasted, whether they belonged to time or eternity. Long oak settles were next ranged on either side the ample fireplace ; a ponderous dresser fronted the immense mullioned window, which, with the yard door (at a right angle with the staircase), almost filled up the entire wall, and soon the dresser stared the window out of countenance as its rows of polished pewter plates and drinking-cups gleamed like unwinking eyes, Then the great white-topped table came (on other legs than its own), and settled its firm feet on the diamond-tiled floor just under the broad window, then a saucy looking snap-table, and wax-polished chairs, brass pans, and copper kettles, iron fender, and fire-irons bright as steel ; so multiplying the shining eyes, that a man with a bad conscience would surely have fled that kitchen terror-stricken.

Then the domestics' sleeping rooms came under consideration, and as "many hands make work light," much was done before three o'clock. Alice then left clear instructions with Peggy, resumed her hat and cloak to depart, and, clinging trustingly to her young lover's arm, turned her back on the Grange, nodded a familiar farewell to the griffins as she passed, and entered the sombre plantation with no thought of fear or dread, chatting pleasantly all the way, resolved, as she told him to be happy with him in the present, and trust to Providence for the future. Even his despondency melted in the sunshine of her smile, and the pair trod the crisp ground lightly and freely, unconscious of a dark figure that tracked their steps with a threatening shadow, darker than the over-arching trees, and watched them narrowly till they entered lovingly the small side-door in the garden wall.

## CHAPTER X.

## UNDER-CURRENTS.

POST DAY intervening between the 2nd of December and Michael Ford's abdication of the farm he had possessed so long, and improved so greatly, he received a double letter—from Margaret and Alice both—thanking him in no stinted terms for the pleasant surprise he had provided for them, for the taste he had displayed, and, above all, for the affection which suggested such an offering. They were lavish of admiration of everything, especially Alice, who certainly had much to be grateful for. Then they expatiated on the kind reception they had met at Latham Lodge, and on the marked courtesy of both Madam and Mr. Latham, but here it was Margaret who was profuse in expression of satisfaction, Alice who was subdued. Alice also remarked that the servants had been much disturbed by strange noises as of pattering feet, during the second night, but she supposed the noise was made by rats driven from the

filled-up moat, which in revenge were scampering over the house to scare light sleepers, and so, she said, she had told the maids ; and Mr. Latham (not dear George) was going to send a couple of terriers there to disperse the intruders. Then followed details of domestic matters not requisite to recapitulate, but which convinced the practical man of the tact and good sense his young daughter brought to bear on the common affairs of life. Her solution of the noises did not quite satisfy him, but he was glad she had taken so rational a view of the matter, and hoped the servants (ignorant as yet of ghostly rumours) would receive readily her interpretation of the “pattering feet.”

By Monday, the 5th, Mr. Ford saw the last of his goods and chattels disappear at the turn of the lane, to appear in due time at the Grange. Stables, barns, and shippions were empty, and somehow a sense of desolation came upon his heart as he wandered over the lands and tenements he should occupy no longer. The bleating of sheep, and lowing of kine no more made music in his ears, and he thought of the comfort, repose, and prosperity which had attended him here ; thought, too, of the important change he was making, certainly to an estate as much his own as this, more extensive in measurement, with soil as rich and fertile, homesteads more lofty and imposing, but with drawbacks and disadvantages in full array

against him with which he should have to cope single-handed.

Drawbacks these from which former tenants had fled, and to which Sir Luke had succumbed. But then Sir Luke was inert and irresolute (a true Grenville), without other ambition than to dawdle through life in peace and quietness ; and so he had resigned good lands and a noble mansion to ruin and desolation for lack of energy, entailing on his successor difficulties enough to daunt a common man.

But Michael thanked his stars he was not a common man, was neither a sluggard nor a drivelling fool, but came armed to the battle before him with a determination to pluck the heart out of the mystery which lowered the value of his lands, and resolved neither ghost nor goblin should frighten him from his possessions.

Still (though Michael lived in the future, not in the past) as his thoughts reverted to all the happy memories connected with Ford-brook, he felt some qualms of conscience at having removed his wife and daughter from the serenity of the humbler home to the almost certain annoyances, if nothing more, inseparable from the grander Grange. His peaceful, peace-loving wife would be the chief sufferer, for Alice was firm as himself, and he depended much on her co-operation to carry out his plans.

In the afternoon Michael signed the lease and

handed over the keys to Mr. Bradwell; then mounted Tony and rode into Northwich High Street, intending to put up at the Crown for the night. The morrow was the first day of the fair, and he waited to hire extra servants.

The town was already thronged with a motley crowd of strangers. Tradesmen with their merchandise prepared for the exhibition of their wares; itinerant showmen were busy erecting booths; a troop of horse riders rode about the streets, or spread their canvas tent ready for the morrow's exhibition; giants, dwarfs, and monstrosities were cooped up in narrow vans, or hid under waggon tilts; jugglers and acrobats already astonished the gaping crowds of rustics with their marvellous feats of dexterity or agility; strolling players had taken possession of an empty barn, and prepared to murder Shakspeare and Lindley Murray; quacks and mountebanks vended their nostrums noisily; a May-pole, albeit the month was May's antithesis, reared its tall crest above the chimney-tops, with ribbon streamers flaunting in the wind over the feminine nether garment which must perforce be nameless, though there displayed as a prize for the fleetest female foot; Punch squeaked in stray corners; gipsies with crocks, or kettles, or baskets, or wooden wares, camped in by-lanes, and tithed the preserves and hen-roosts; pedlars and packmen bustled through the thoroughfares, or

crowded the inns ; so Michael had some ado to convoy Tony safely through the moving human labyrinth, the unwonted clamour disconcerting the sober steed's sensitive nerves.

Punch's attendant drum and Pandean pipes set him dancing an extempore horse's hornpipe in the market-place ; then a dancing-girl's tamborine changed his step to a tarentella, peculiar to quadrupeds ; and, finally, in the middle of High Street, close to the Crown Inn, a Highlander, whose plaid and kilt all the waters of the Clyde could scarcely purify, with inflated cheeks, twiddling fingers, and spasmodic elbow, crushed from his bagpipe such a discordant concatenation of hideous sounds, that Tony involuntarily performed such a fling as made Michael (though a good horseman) reel on his saddle. The man persisted in piping, and Tony persisted in dancing, starting, and kicking, until the rider's seat became a very unsafe one. At this juncture, a dark man of powerful build started from the crowd and seized the nostrils of the plunging animal with a grip that quieted it to quivering. A glance revealed to Michael the desperado who had wounded him in the forest. "Hold him, stop him !" shouted Michael, as the man, equally rapid at recognition, loosed his hold of the horse and disappeared amid the moving populace ; whilst the people, unconscious that the words referred to more than the prancing beast, made no effort to detain either. But

an ostler from the Crown coming up, took his old acquaintance Tony in charge; so Michael flung himself from the saddle, dived amongst the crowd, and searched in all quarters for this black-bearded man—the same Alice saw at the church gates—the same who carried Mr. Heywood's pack. He might as well have searched his granary for a peculiar grain of wheat—men with week-old beards were there in scores, and dress was no guide; for rags and russet, silk and velvet, jostled each other promiscuously, and he came back to the inn annoyed and discomfited.

As a counterpoise to this annoyance, was the pleasure of finding Mr. Heywood in the bar-parlour, an occurrence which went far to dissipate Michael's chagrin, and put him in good-humour with himself and all round.

“Mr. Ford, this is really an unexpected pleasure. Miss Ford led me to understand that your departure for the Grange would take place earlier than this; but for that I should have been on my way to Ford-brook now. How is Miss Ford? I hope I shall have the pleasure of seeing her this evening.” (Oh, Mr. Heywood!)

“Oh, Ailsie's well enough, I believe, but she is over at the Grange, as busy as a bee, putting the place into trim for us all. She'll make you a famous wife, Mr. Heywood, a capital woman of business is Alice.

By the by, I saw the black-looking fellow who stabbed me in the forest just now in the crowd."

"Indeed! Why did you not secure him?"

"Because I could not. A blackguard, with a screeching bagpipe, had startled Tony, and that ruffian involuntarily laid hold of my capering horse or I should have been off; but, no sooner did we glance at each other, than he was off, and though I made strict search I could obtain no sight nor tidings of him. However, I have offered a good reward for his capture, and hope he will be caught before the fair is over."

"Um! For my part, I think the chance is very small, these scoundrels generally have confederates; and, once aware that the fair is too hot to hold him, he will scarcely be such a moth as to flutter round the blaze. But, excuse me, Mr. Ford, for a few moments, I have a customer waiting me in Witton Street, and I perceive (glancing at a cuckoo-clock in the corner) I am now considerably behind time. If you can wait my return I shall be glad. I will not be away more than half an hour."

"Oh, don't let me interfere with your appointment, Mr. Heywood; never neglect business. I shall remain here all night," said Michael, nodding pleasantly as Mr. Heywood, with a graceful bow, left the bar; and hastened, with knitted brows and quick step, towards Witton Street, muttering angrily as he jostled roughly against loiterers in his path.

Strange to say, the customer, whom he met by appointment, at the Yacht Inn, Chester, and the one he hurried to meet at the George and Dragon, Northwich, were one and the same ; but what brought him so far from Chester, unless the fair attracted him, was Mr. Heywood's business, not ours. At all events, no goods were displayed, no samples, and their conference was brief, but, apparently, satisfactory, for the manufacturer returned to the Crown leisurely and smilingly.

On his arrival at the inn he found Michael, pipe in hand, discussing with the other occupants of the snug bar-parlour, alike the spirit of the still, and the spirit of the French Revolution. Intelligence of the decrees published by the National Assembly for the humiliation of the clergy had reached Northwich, and public opinion was as ever divided on the subject. The probable influence of the decrees on England, and the religious world in general, was under consideration when Mr. Heywood entered the little room, and at once plunged into the midst of the argument with the confidence of one who had studied the question, and was thoroughly master of it. He showed an acquaintance with minute details of occurrences which had not been bared to the English eye by the public press, then so imperfect ; and a knowledge of the French character, and the opinions, sayings, and doings of the revolutionary portion of the Parisian

people, perfectly astounding to Mr. Ford, whose astonishment was met by the remark from Mr. Heywood, that the extensive dealings of their firm with French houses rendered an intimate acquaintance with the people, and the policy and movements of their rulers, whomsoever they might be, an absolute necessity for the safeguard of their trade, and precautionary regulation of credit.

“ Oh, clever Mr. Heywood ! that was not the commercial room, and there was no one to dispute the lying truth, so the observation passed muster, and honest-hearted, strong-minded, but not clear-sighted Mr. Ford, listening to the man’s plausible words, without a glance at his treacherous eyes, construed them, as intended, into fresh evidence of Mr. Heywood’s business talents and commercial status. Meanwhile the debate proceeded, Michael’s tendencies being all on the side of religion, law, and order, which no sophisms of Mr. Heywood could overturn ; but so wily and adroit was the commercial man, with such subtlety did he expound the views of the French revolutionary party, that half the amateur politicians crowding the bar-parlour went home impressed with the grandeur of republicanism, as expounded by a professing loyalist.

Up to this period no opportunity for private conversation had presented itself, but the departure of strangers removing the embargo from friendly inter-

course, Michael at once accosted Mr. Heywood with :

“ So you were up at the farm during my absence : had you remained a second day we should have met. I was very sorry to find you had gone. I fancy Alice was not over pleased with your abrupt departure either. I did not find her in the most amiable of moods when it was named.”

“ I wish I could think so, Mr. Ford, but I must confess your daughter’s reception of me was less cordial than I had reason to expect. I have heard that women are variable, but was not prepared for the change I found in Alice ; a change insupportably painful to me, for I love her to distraction, and the loss of Alice would be the ruin of all my hopes in life.”

Aye, well may you rest your elbow on the table, Mr. Heywood, and cover your face with your hand, for however genuine your love and emotion, there is a gleam of falsehood in your wicked eyes you dare not show to Michael Ford !

“ Tut, tut, man ! don’t be discouraged by a girl’s waywardness, all lasses of Ailsie’s age are coy and fitful ; she would be more than woman if she were otherwise. Cheer up, man ! it will be all right next time you meet. Never fear ; girls seldom let their sweethearts be too confident of success long together. April’s the lover’s month, and always will be—sun-

shine and clouds, showers and sunshine! Come, fill up your glass, and drink with me, ‘Better success to the wooing!’” and Mr. Ford tapped Mr. Heywood’s shoulder encouragingly with the tip of his pipe, pushing the bottle towards him as he spoke.

Raising his head and hand languidly to comply with the request, and respond to the well-meaning toast, Mr. Heywood replenished his glass, and then paused with hand on the bottle-neck, and put to Michael the question—as though then impressed with the idea for the first time :

“ Mr. Ford, do you think it possible Alice can have a prior attachment?”

“ What, our Alice!” and Michael calmly beat the ashes out of his pipe, blew down the tube, and began leisurely to refill it, as he answered the momentous question. “ Not she ; I don’t think she knows anyone worth falling in love with but yourself, and surely you’re good-looking enough to strike the girl’s fancy, if your fine feathers and polish had no charms for her. Certainly, Ailsie’s not the girl to be taken with a fair face, or a fine figure only, but then, had not you saved my life, and was she not bound to love you for it ? No, no, Robert ” (he had begun to call him so lately), “ the road’s clear before you ; you have the race all to yourself.”

“ You think so, Mr. Ford ; I am sorry to say I do not !” and the speaker shook his head sadly.

"Think so—I'm sure so!" and Mr. Ford brought his pipe down on the table with a force that smashed it. "Why the girl knows no one else worth having. Let me see?" and he checked off the names on the table with the stump of his broken pipe. "There's young Gresford, but she hates him for staring at her in church with his great goggle eyes; and Abel Arden, but he's as thin as a rush, and as proud as a peacock: I've heard her laugh at him scores of times. Then there's Mark Brearton, with a head like a scarlet poppy, and as heavy; and our next neighbour, squinting Will Yarwood; but none of these would suit our Alice, take my word for it. No, no, my good friend," and he shook his head knowingly, "you're the only likely man she knows, but were there a score I'd back you for the winner."

"Thank you, Mr. Ford, I am proud and confident of your good-will, and hope, in time, if I have no rival in advance, to win that of my coveted Alice also. But Miss Ford was away from home some time, I understood; may she not ——?"

"How could she?" interrupted Michael; "she was at a ladies' school, and the two Miss Briscoes were as strict old maids as ever took charge of a pupil."

"Indeed; then, of course, she would visit no one, and could form no friendships."

"Oh, yes, she did visit; an old friend of Mrs. Ford's sent a daughter to Miss Briscoe's day-school, and

Alice used to go there occasionally, and, indeed, spent her Christmas holidays with them instead of coming home. But Mrs. Wright had no boys; neither sons nor nephews about the place, and so——but stop; now I bethink me—young Latham said he knew her slightly; something he said, too, about a fellow insulting her in the street! Surely—" and Mr. Ford paused to ruminate, regardless of the sinister light in Mr. Heywood's grey eyes, or the scowl darkening his white forehead; and thus ran the tenor of Michael's thoughts: Surely the *slight* acquaintance he spoke of could not have been more than slight; surely it cannot have been an intimate friendship, and Alice kept it secret from her mother. I cannot think it—yet he is but a Latham, and his civility may be only a cloak for duplicity, and I've been fool enough to throw her in his way! "The sneaking cur! if he is making love to my girl underhand, I'll——" Michael ended this abruptly spoken ejaculation with a sudden grip of the arms of his chair, and a compression of teeth and lips very threatening to the rosebud hopes of Alice and George Latham, and proportionately satisfactory to the watchful Mr. Heywood.

There was something stern and determined in the manner of Michael Ford, as he rose from his chair to retire for the night, saying to Mr. Heywood, "I must be up betimes in the morning. I have servants to hire, that footpad to track, if possible, and I would

him reach the Grange before nightfall; so good-night, and remember, that whatever foolish fancies Alice may have in her head, she will have to get rid of them; she marries whom *I* choose, and *I* have chosen you. Good-night."

"Good-night! I, too, must be an early riser;" and the two retired to their dormitories. Mr. Heywood muttering, as he closed the door of his room, "I think I have put a stop to your love-making, Master George! It is my turn now!"

No trace of the doctor footpad had been found, so Michael passed without delay next morning through the groups of farming men and maid-servants assembled in the market-place for hiring, addressing many words of recognition to those he knew, and interrogating others he thought likely to suit him; some declined to go to such a distance; some to hire for the year; a few differed as to terms; the references of others were not as satisfactory as he could wish; but before long he had made his selection, given them the earnest money as a token of lawful hiring, and the servants he had hired were bound to him for a year, failure to fulfil their contract being punishable by imprisonment.

Leaving the serving women and men to follow him at the close of the fair, Michael sought Mr. Heywood, then bussed with his merchandise, and gave him a pressing invitation to spend Christmas at the Grange, which was accepted cordially—if business and his

partner both permitted. Then Michael hastened homewards, the sense of a probably unpleasant task in perspective not rendering his journey a very agreeable one. However, the solitary ride through the keen air served the purpose of common sense, and gave him time for reflection, and without a tempter at his elbow with evil suggestions, Michael's own heart was not likely to lead his head astray. He loved his daughter dearly, and was willing to see her well married ; that is, married to a man of means and business habits, and such was Robert Heywood ; to a man of parts and information, and such was Robert Heywood ; to a man of good principle and good feeling, and such, he thought, was Robert Heywood : so a man who loved her truly, and for herself only, with no mean or mercenary motive, and such, he felt assured, was Robert Heywood ; not a boy, but a man old enough to prize and guard her, and such was Robert Heywood. Yes ; he was the right husband for Alice, and if the girl's blushes spoke truly, she thought so too. As for Mr. Latham, he would watch ; he would not be precipitate, lest he should do the young gentleman injustice, and make a fool of himself, and Alice into the bargain ; but if he found Mr. Heywood's jealous suspicion well founded—if he did—then let George Latham look out ! He was not the man to be trifled with : would have no wooers about his house who came in on false pretences !

The griffins seemed to leer at him and at each other as he made this determination whilst passing under their stony eyes, but they kept their thoughts to themselves, if they had any ; and he rode on, regardless, over the weedless ground to the renovated Grange.

Fires were blazing pleasantly on more than one hearth ; lights just kindled (it was four o'clock) flashed past corridor windows, and were lost again : pierced by the glowing light within the room, a crimson flush from the drawn curtains fell on the frosty ground, on Michael and his trusty steed, heralding the warm welcome awaiting him behind their folds. How widely different from the dreary, deserted mansion he scanned so dismally under the heavy October sky, when his footsteps tripped in the tangled weeds, and the falling leaves fell like nature's tears over and around him, when every wind sounded like a dirge, and desolation wrote its ugly name on every wall and fence, and field and garden plot. Now, the grounds were cleared ready for cultivation, the fœtid moat no longer offended nose or eye, a line of brown soil alone indicated where the moat had been : the house was jaunty with trim ivy, freshly-painted window frames and polished panes ; no defective masonry marred the clear outlines of the building, and, even in the dim twilight, the cheerful change sank into Michael's soul. But, of all changes, the

light and life within spoke loudest, and as the heavy door swung back, when his foot touched the step, telling that listening ears were there and ready hands, it opened to his view the lamp-lit hall and staircase, fresh with paint or polish, no longer festooned with cobwebs, dingy with dust, or musty with mildew..

Brighter, however, than lamp, or polished oak, or ruddy tiles was the bright face of Alice, who stood as portress there to receive him, with Peggy and Dick in the rear.

“ Well, Dick, lad, how do you like your new quarters?” said Michael, as soon the kisses of Alice left his lips at liberty.

“ Whoi, oi loikes the place well enough, measter, if it war’na for th’ rats; them varmint make sech a noise at neeght, they wunna let a chap sleep. But, them tarriers as Mester Latham sent, ha’ killed a foine soight on ‘em, an they hanna raced aboot th’ flures the two last neeghts. Meb’by oi’ve getten used to the clatter, and dunna heer them so bad.”

“ Oh, we’ll soon rid ourselves of rats, Dick. And, if that is the only complaint to be made, I presume you have been pretty comfortable. What say you, Peggy?”

Dick grinned, and Peggy smirked, as she bobbed a curtsey and replied, “ It’s a foine place, measter, an’ I hope as how you’ll all live long to see the good on it.

An' as for Dick, oi'm sartain oi've dun a' oi could'n to mak' 'un comfortuble."

"I don't doubt it," said her master, drily, as he left Tony in Dick's hands, and, with Alice by his side, joined his wife, then quietly descending the staircase to meet him: he bent his head down to the placid face, and folded the little figure in a brief but close embrace, ere he followed Alice upwards.

"How is it that I find you first in the drawing-room?" enquired he.

"Alice thought, that as you provided a pleasant surprise for us, we ought to have a pleasant surprise to welcome you, and I agreed with her," replied Margaret, ushering him into the warm room, glowing with light and pleasant faces.

A surprise, indeed. There were Margaret's old acquaintances, Mrs. and Mr. Peover, Mrs. Latham, and that friend secretly dearer to Alice than all other—George Latham. The presence of the subject of his recent unpleasant cogitations somewhat staggered Michael, but he was neither churlish nor inhospitable, so he came forward and greeted them one and all with a hearty welcome, receiving their separate congratulations as kindly as they were meant.

"This room bears a very different aspect now to what it had when we two spent an evening here, Mr. Peover," said Michael, pleasantly, glancing round on furniture and friendly faces. "Joseph and his

Brethren look none the worse for the washing and polishing they have had, and that night's cheerlessness contrasts very agreeably with this one's cheeriness."

"Pleasant faces make pleasant rooms, Mr. Ford; and light hearts make pleasant faces—pleasant faces."

"So they do, my good sir; and I hope and trust this room may long and often hold the friends now meeting in it, with faces as pleasant, and hearts as warm and light," responded Michael, again looking round the friendly circle.

"Amen to that, amen," said Mr. Peover, heartily.

"If that's mester's first wish sin' he's getten i'th' house it's a good 'un, and it's sure to be lucky," thought Peggy, half aloud, as she placed a bright copper kettle within the fender, and retired in good-humour.

"We have few neighbours of our own class," was the observation of Madam Latham, "and my age precludes much visiting; yet, I shall be proud to cultivate the friendship of your family, Mr. Ford, and join these assembled friends under your roof from time to time. But, younger limbs are fitter for visiting than aged ones, and Latham Lodge will, at all times or seasons, be open to welcome yourself, or wife or daughter. I know my son thinks with me."

Michael acknowledged the old lady's lofty courtesy with an inclination of the head, and a rapid glance

towards Mr. Latham, who briefly seconded his mother's words, not daring to trust his lips with all he thought.

"My associations with the Grange are many and varied; it was the scene of our courtship, and our wedding feast was spread in the long dining-room down-stairs," said Mrs. Peover, gravely. "Our life has been chequered since, and the kind lady I then served passed to her account soon after; but it gladdens me to see one of the desolate places of the earth restored to freshness and usefulness; and whenever business brings Mr. Peover thus far, I shall be glad to join him, if he will not think his old wife an encumbrance on such occasions."

"Why, Martha, Martha, when were you an encumbrance to me? I assure you, Mr. Ford, she has been the best helpmate a man ever had, and the truest counsellor—the truest counsellor."

"So I fully believe, Mr. Peover; I had an inkling of that when I waited on the mat in your narrow hall one day last October; but draw to the table, I see tea is ready at last."

"At *last*, Michael; I'm sure we've been very quick considering," said quiet Mrs. Ford.

"Considering what, Margaret?"

"Mother means, considering that we all forget the places we have appointed for things, and that this room is so far from the kitchen. We only used it

to-night to hand it with a welcome for you." (She forgot the flutter of heart and confusion of head of herself, generally the fleet-footed, active-handed, clear-headed thinker and controller of the household.)

"Oh, is that it, Ailsie?" said her father, good-humouredly. "Mr. Latham, will you have the goodness to place chairs for your mother and Mrs. Peover? Margaret, what is under this crust?"

"That, Michael, is a hare pie; Alice made it. You have to thank Mr. Latham and his gun for the game."

"I have to thank Mr. Latham for many attentions, I find, hares and terriers included. I hope some day to be able to return the compliment."

Did Michael Ford detect the glance and blush which told, perhaps too plainly, how George and Alice hoped he would return the compliment? He might have done, for he said at once, looking across the table at Alice the while, "Margaret, I saw Mr. Heywood at the fair; I have asked him to spend Christmas here."

The crimson deepened on the brow and cheeks and neck of Alice as he spoke, then the tide receded, leaving her white as ashes, and even Mr. Latham's brow was troubled.

"Mr. Heywood was right, and I have been a dupe," thought Michael, noting the effect of his announcement, received by the girl in silence, by

Mrs. Ford with the exclamation, "Dear me, I hope he will come! I'm sure we shall be very glad to see him! Shall not you, Alice?"

"I am always glad to receive my father's friends," was the equivocal reply, in a tone too cold to have flattered Mr. Heywood, or to alarm Mr. Latham.

After tea, Michael excused himself for a while, on the plea that he had yet to glance over his dwelling, and see that his cattle were housed satisfactorily; and the young people were in their hearts most thankful when he retired.

The elders drew in (what they called) a circle round the fire, and Alice seated herself at the harpischord, George following to select her music, turn over leaves—and talk with trembling lips of their great trouble, their secret, and Mr. Heywood. "My darling Alice, I dread this man! I see your father does favour him, and your mother also. Would it not be better for me at once to break the ice, and tell them how much and long I have loved you?"

"I cannot advise, dear George; there is a strange dread upon me that I cannot shake off. I fear our happy intercourse is ending."

"You are a long while in finding that music, Alice," said Mrs. Ford, looking round.

"It was packed hastily, and is all in confusion, mother; I cannot find what I am seeking," was the reply.

"Shall I come to the Grange in the morning, and speak to Mr. Ford? Alice, dearest, you are not wont to hesitate: can you not give me an opinion now?"

"I cannot, George; come to-morrow if you like; but think and decide for yourself—and me."

She had found her music, and was playing a brisk air when her father entered the room. He patted her on the shoulder, asking her how she liked his present, and if she had played on it before: then he desired her to sing for him. She would gladly have excused herself had it been possible; however, to gratify the father who had been so good to her, and on whose will so much depended, she struck the keys again, and with trembling voice warbled Lady Anne Lindsay's touching ballad, "Auld Robin Gray," so feelingly, that every heart thrilled in response to the mournful melody, though the concluding lines struck a chord in George's breast that jarred discordantly. It was a favourite song of her father's; she had sung it scores of times before with little emotion, and now selected it with no other thought than to please him, but as line followed line, the new interpreter in her breast gave force to every syllable, and it needed all the strength and decision of her mind to control her voice, and enable her to complete the difficult task she had undertaken, without a palpable break-down.

At the conclusion of the song Alice was loudly complimented on the pathos she had infused into the

popular ballad, the source whence that pathos came being unsuspected by half the party, and only fully known to one beside herself. But her singing was over for the night ; she played selections from Dr. Arne's opera of "Cymon," and, at Mr. Peover's request, Handel's "Jubilate;" and George, himself no mean musician, turned over the leaves for her ; but watchful eyes were upon them, and but for a casually whispered word as he leant to turn a leaf, and a loving pressure of her fingers, as he handed Alice to a seat by the fire, all further private communion was interdicted, and they were compelled, for the sake of appearances, to join like mere acquaintances in general conversation, with bursting hearts and trammelled tongues.

At eight o'clock Peggy announced "Mr. Leatham's mon wi' th' lantern to leeght th' gentry whome ;" and Mr. and Mrs. Peover being Madam Latham's guests, the party broke up. The ladies were well wrapped in cloaks, caleshes, and muffs. Mr. Peover staggered under a heap of anti-rheumatic wrappages, a hand-kerchief being tied over his head to protect his ears ; so George at last thrust his arms impatiently into his riding coat, and Tom marshalled the way with a huge horn lantern on the end of a stick over his shoulder. But the leave-takings occupied some little time ; Margaret's were very quiet ; Michael's subdued ; Alice, with dim eyes, took a very affectionate farewell

of Mrs. Latham, as though there was a foreboding of long separation in her heart. Mrs. Peover offered her hand and lips to the young girl; and then Mr. Peover protested it was not fair she should kiss the old woman and not the old man, and insisted she must kiss him; and might, if she liked, fancy she was kissing her grandfather. So the old man's lips touched the young girl's cheek, while George stood nervously by patting his foot, longing, yet not daring to claim the same privilege for himself, who had the best right to it.

The grip of his hand as it closed on her trembling one in bidding her "good-night"—possibly by mistake, twice over—told what he felt at this cold and formal parting; and there was in his voice a huskiness not attributable to cold, as he said briefly, in reply to Mr. Ford's remark, "I think the moon will light you better than the lantern."

"We pass through a dark plantation on our way home, Mr. Ford, and require a lantern there. Good night."

The door closed with bolt and bar on the retreating footsteps; but colder than the frost without was the chill which had fallen on two young hearts, and harder than oak or iron was the barrier rising between them to forbid reunion.

## CHAPTER XI.

## STORMS.

MICHAEL FORD was by no means a hard-hearted man ; but he was hard-headed ; that which he thought was right he was sure was right. Then he was practical, not sentimental ; and thus it was that the very love he bore his daughter became a motive for stern and determined coercion, which those who judged the man by his outer acts only, interpreted into harsh tyranny. Having had a wife so thoroughly dependent on his judgment as Margaret, it is less to be wondered that he deemed Alice too young to judge or decide for herself in so important a point as the selection of a husband, and consequently argued that it was his duty to think and decide for her. In pursuance of this opinion he had accepted Mr. Heywood's proposals for his daughter's hand ; not doubting for an instant her willing, if not delighted acquiescence. The possibility of a prior attachment never occurred to him ; and when suggested by

the shrewder and wiser Mr. Heywood, seemed but the hallucination of a jealous brain. The suspicion once roused, however, he was not slow to mark the indications of its truth.

He saw, rather than felt, there was a concealed attachment between George and Alice. How long it had existed he did not care to ask; secrecy meant duplicity; and his faith in the integrity and ingenuousness of his child was shaken by the knowledge. How far his wife was cognisant of the fact he had yet to discover; passive knowledge she might possess, but of active agency he knew her to be incapable; she might have been induced to accept that as inevitable, which she had not the strength to resist, but nothing beyond.

Prompt in action, if tardy in suspicion, Michael confronted Alice, on their return to the drawing-room with the abrupt question :

“How long have you and Mr. Latham been fooling each other?”

“Father, I—I—” stammered Alice, sinking into a chair, utterly confounded.

“I ask a plain question, girl, let me have a plain answer. How long has this folly, called love, existed between you?”

The eyes of Mrs. Ford wandered from face to face in blank astonishment, but she was mute with utter surprise. Alice, too, sat silent, startled and dumb-

founded alike by the discovery and the rough question.

"Why do you not answer me. How long, I ask, has this flirtation been going on?"

"It is not a flirtation, father," said Alice, timidly, without raising her head.

"Not a flirtation? then what, in the name of fate, is it? Do boys and girls fall head over ears in love in two or three days?"

"We have known each other several years," suggested Alice, meekly.

"Well, by jingo; but you mend backwards, miss! and so you and this fellow have been playing at love-making for 'several years' without leave or licence from your elders! A nice specimen of a modest and upright daughter I have been rearing. This comes of boarding-school education! And a pretty rascal that Latham must be, to make his *slight* acquaintance a pretext for hypocritical inquiries about your health, and for his mother's invitation: *very* kind, *very* considerate, truly, to ask my wife and daughter, that he might court the one under the closed eyes of the other! He is a sneaking rascal!" And having lashed himself into a rage, Michael strode about the room; whether to keep his passion warm, or calm it down it is hard to say.

Alice, too, rose from her chair, roused from timidity by the aspersion of her lover.

"Father, George is no rascal ; nor is he a hypocrite ; nor are we trifling. If we have loved each other long, the love was unavowed till lately ; you could not know of it until you came."

Indeed ! What of the letter you sent to me, miss ? has not *he* learned to write ? What business had he to speak of love to you before consulting me ? Margaret, did this young spark ask your consent to court our Alice ?"

"Ask me ? No ; that he never did ! he was always very polite and attentive both to me and Alice ; but I never noticed anything particular," said Margaret, deprecatingly.

"Another proof of his deceit ; but I'll be quits with him. Whenever he comes here again I shall tell him my mind ; and that is, that none of his name shall wed our Alice, or set foot in the Grange again. It has been cursed since first a Latham trod the floors ; I'll have none of the breed nigh me."

"But, Michael," timidously remonstrated Margaret, "Mrs. Latham and her son have been so very obliging and attentive to us, you cannot surely be rude to the young gentleman."

"Why, Margaret, I declare you are as silly as this girl ; what has his civility been but part of a plot to rob us of our child's affection and duty ? Obliging indeed ! yes, to himself."

"Father," said Alice, very quietly, but very firmly,

"In nothing have I failed in duty to you; if you act  
wisely or otherwise than as a gentleman to George  
Latham, you will fail in duty to yourself."

"Indeed I am I to regard that doubtful speech as a  
sample of his descensions?" Went to your room, now, and re-  
member this, you see this young man no more. Robert  
Heywood will be here at Christmas, I have promised  
you to him; see that you receive him cordially."

"You have taken a strange method, Father, to  
bespeak my obedience. It inhibits your own spirit and  
determination, and that which I know to be right I  
must do. Though you might lead me by a silken  
thread, you cannot drag me by a hempen cable.  
Good-night, mother! I hope you will think better of  
me and of George Latham than father does; you  
have seen more of him, and can tell that he is loved  
less by those who know him best. Good night."

Though there was a choking sensation in her  
throat, she took a chamber-table from a bracket in  
the corner, lit it, and walked deliberately from the  
room without another word to that new sleeping-  
apartment, so fresh from the hands of painter and  
polisherman, so filled with the evidences of fatherly  
love and kindness. Here he had gathered round her  
all that could gratify her taste or contribute to her  
comfort; had modernized the old room to prevent  
gloomy thoughts or fancies, hoping her repose there  
might be serene and unbroken. As she crossed the

threshold, her ears yet ringing with the harsh words and stern decree of their father, then first turned to her, and her eye at a glance took in all the little accessories to peace he had crowded round her, her resolution gave way, and she sank into the nearest chair overcome by her emotions.

The tears she shed were not like the tempestuous rain-drops of a thunder-storm, violent and of short duration, clearing the atmosphere as they fall, but slow and continuous droppings from wide-spread, hazy clouds, obscuring the sun, and shooting out the sky. She wept—not tears of weakness—but bitter sorrow. She had offended her father, and that troubled her, for she loved him. Her mother held aloof, afraid or unwilling to sympathise with her, and she grieved at the isolation. Her hopes were crushed by a stern hand. Her love was condemned, her lover insulted, their meeting forbidden, and worse than all, her hand promised without her knowledge or consent to a man from whom she shrank in abhorrence. Slowly the tears stole down her pale cheeks, cold as her icy heart. But with the remembrance of her father's threat, and Mr. Heywood's addresses, indignation usurped the place of heedless sorrow. The load on her heart was not lightened, but a red spot kindled on her cheeks as she crushed back the falling tear, and rose to her feet strong in her determination to resist Robert Heywood's advances, and cling to

George in spite of all opposition. If she had no right to marry without her father's consent, she had certainly less right to marry without her own. She would meet her father's obstinate resolves with respectful firmness, and if, as she more than half suspected, Robert Heywood could not stand the touchstone of time, she and George would win her father over in the end. "Perhaps!" whispered her heart, with another chill, and a shudder at the slight prospect of such a "perhaps," as she turned away from the glass which reflected her troubled face, and prepared for the pillow so needed to refresh the worn mind.

Sleep was, however, long in coming; true, she laid her head on the pillow, and closed the lids over the burning eyes, but to cogitate and plan, not to sleep. Would it be possible to meet George Latham once again without widening the breach between herself and father? Her fears said sadly—no! Could she, ought she to forsake him thus, without one word of tender farewell, one word of explanation, one promise of constancy? Her love unfalteringly answered—no. And thus waged the war in her breast between the two loves, the two duties, the love and duty of the child to the parent, the love and duty of the woman to her betrothed. And her final resolve was, that she would meet him once again, but once, to console and reassure him; to bid him wait in faith and hope; and

then, however it might rend her heart, she would bid him farewell till a brighter day should dawn ; or—and she trembled as the thought passed the portals of her heart—till age should confirm her right of choice.

And let no rigid sire condemn the girl for this decision. It is the woman's life and hope, and future well-being trembling in the balance, not the father's. On her choice of a mate rests happiness or misery for herself, her husband, and the children she may bear. It is the duty of a parent wisely to direct that choice, but not to coerce it. All love and faith and unity are needed to make married life the blessing our great Creator willed. Woe then to that matron or that sire, who shall force a child, by any argument or power, to wed in opposition to her love and natural instincts. Obedience is the duty of the child to the parent ; but justice and thoughtful consideration are as due from the parent to the child. If the child makes an ill choice, she herself will be the chief sufferer : if the parent makes an ill choice for the child, what remorse will fill his after years, what bitter memories or sad reproaches may follow him to his grave.

For some time after Alice had retired, Michael and Mrs. Ford remained in earnest conversation. Margaret had risen to follow her daughter, but her husband interposed his arm to bar her passage saying, decisively,

"Remain where you are, Margaret, lest I think you encourage the girl in her disobedience."

"I should be very sorry to countenance Alice in any act of disobedience, but I do think you have been over hasty, Michael. Alice has always been a very good girl, willing to do anything to please either of us, and I cannot think she could have had any idea of offending you when she encouraged Mr. Latham. And he is a very nice young gentleman, I don't know but I like him almost as well as Mr. Heywood."

"By jingo, I shall begin to think this Grange is really bewitched, or that there is an actual blight upon it. The first night I spent here I spoiled a good cloak : on my way home, I was pillaged and wounded, and, now, the first night I come to it as a home, I find Lathams in possession of this room and my daughter's heart. I remonstrate ; and the girl persists in disobedience, and you tell me I have been 'over hasty,' and qualify the girl's wilfulness with a compliment to the fellow who has entrapped the simpleton."

"Well, but Michael ——"

"Well but, Margaret," interrupted he, "am I to be obeyed in my own house, or not?"

"Certainly, Michael," she assented, without any reference either in speech or thought to her own rights of possession in the "house."

"Has Alice any right to throw herself away on the

first young fellow with a smooth tongue, she may happen to meet?"

"Certainly not, Michael."

"Is it not, then, my duty to check this folly in the outset, and to see that she marries a man worthy of her?"

"To be sure it is, Michael, but——"

"I want no 'buts.' I say it is my duty, and I shall not flinch from it," was his sharp interruption, as he stopped suddenly in his walk and looked in her face whilst uttering his resolve. At a glance, he saw that his abrupt and vehement manner had utterly dismayed his timid, peace-loving wife. She was unused to displays of anger or vehemence in his converse with herself, for the simple reason that she never provoked it by opposition or resistance of his known will. Then, he loved her very tenderly, albeit with that sort of half-patronizing, cherishing affection the strong are apt to bestow upon the weak, and her soothing presence never failed to allay his irritation, when some unwonted impediment had been thrust in the way of his determined will. So now, as he observed for the first time, the pallor of her face, and the shrinking form, with a strong effort he curbed his impetuosity; and, seating himself by her side, passed an arm round her waist, as though he were caressing a child, and addressed her in a much quieter tone.

"My dear little wife," said he, "I have no desire to

quarrel with you, or to cause you a moment's uneasiness. I was wrong to think, for an instant, that my Margaret could have aided or shared any scheme that was a secret to me. I ought to have known you better in all these happy years. There, there, that will do ; dry your eyes, love, and give me a kiss of forgiveness."

The kiss of peace accorded, and the falling tears wiped away, while he still held her in the clasp of a true husband's arm, he resumed, but in altered tones, "If the spirit of disunion is to come amongst us, it will be a worse spirit than has haunted the Grange in its desolation : and, if the Latham influence is to be, however remotely, the cause of harsh words or unkind feelings between us, it will be a greater evil than any I expected to encounter. Perhaps," continued he, after a pause, during which Margaret remained silent, thinking—"Perhaps, after all, I was a little too abrupt with our girl. However, I will speak to her to-morrow, quietly, and no doubt then she will listen to reason."

Michael's kind heart evidently misgave him, as to the manner in which he had addressed Alice ; but, nevertheless, his opinion and determination remained unshaken. The rupture caused him pain ; but, that he, or Mr. Heywood had contributed, even indirectly, to cause that rupture, he did not see ; the primary cause he felt to be Mr. Latham, the secondary

he considered to be the obstinacy and disobedience of Alice, and “ reason ” with him meant the adoption of his views.

Consequently, as might be expected, there was little sleep for Michael that night, any more than for his wife or daughter ; and the three assembled at the breakfast-table in the long room under the haunted chamber (now the cheese-room), with very unrefreshed aspects. There was a restraint in their intercourse never observable before ; the morning salutations were formal and frigid ; there were no cheerful remarks, no little pleasantries ; there was no animated debate on the projected pursuits of the day ; no interesting or interested reference to the household or other arrangements so skilfully carried out prior to his arrival ; they looked anywhere but at each other ; discomfort had taken possession of the board, sprinkled an unsavoury odour on beverage and viands, and checked free speech.

Margaret was tongue-tied from inability to discern what course to adopt with Alice, or what to say so as not to offend her husband ; nor could she speak freely to him on indifferent topics, lest she should wound the feelings of Alice, towards whom the mother’s heart yearned with sympathy. Alice felt the silence of her mother to be a tacit testimony of perfect accordance with the sentiments and wishes of her husband ; and her indignation rose accordingly with what she

thought a fresh proof of injustice. Michael regarded Margaret's somewhat flurried quietude as an implied rebuke, and felt anything but comfortable under it ; but the taciturnity of Alice he construed into dogged and determined sullenness. So little are the wisest or best amongst us competent to dive into the breasts of each other and scan their secret lore.

In accordance, however, with his promise to Margaret the previous night, he desired his daughter at the close of the indigestible meal, to follow him to his private sanctum, the small room on the left side of the entrance hall, the morning room specially devoted to Alice (Margaret seldom required a private room), being the one opposite to his. This sanctum was as yet in comparative disorder, no hand but his own being deemed competent to deal with the adjustment of guns, pistols, and ammunition, fishing-rods, baskets, flies, and tackle ; his table, chairs, desk, books and papers had been laid ready for re-arrangement ; and the room was carpeted and curtained (with the web Alice had netted), otherwise it was in confusion.

He closed the door as they entered the room, and seating himself, indicated with his hand for his daughter to do the same ; but she remained standing, her sense of justice every instant convincing her more strongly that she had an individual right of freedom to think and love ; and every instant her determination to resist despotic coercion grew stronger. Still

she was wise enough to know that opposition would but chafe her father to more pertinacious an assertion of his parental authority, and inwardly resolved not to express a determined resistance unless he were, as last night, unreasonable and unjust to George. It is a habit of the human mind to prepare for contingencies on one side only, and thus Alice was some little disconcerted by her father's first words.

"Alice, it has occurred to me that I was perhaps unduly harsh to you last night. I took you by surprise, and probably misunderstood the true spring of your unfilial words. I love you too well, my dear child, to say or do anything that is not for your true welfare ; and therefore when I forbade your intercourse with Mr. Latham, it was with no intention of giving pain to you, but with the desire to prevent a great evil."

Prepared for harshness, the first kind words melted the ice at the heart of Alice ; and as it flowed in tears down her cheeks, she threw herself at his feet and buried her streaming face in her hands on his knee ; but as the last words fell on her ear, she raised her head, and listened tearless for the remainder. It came. "For centuries, my dear girl, the Lathams have been a curse, either directly or indirectly, to the Grenvilles, and you may be sure I dread any connection with a scion of the fatal house."

"And why should you, my father ? Have the

Grenvilles been better than the Lathams ? I think not. The dupes have in their weakness and imbecility been as wicked as their tempters or defrauders. But you, father, are not a Grenville, I am not a Grenville, and George Latham belongs to the purer side of his race. No fatality could attend our union."

" Union ! do you say ? How dare you name such a word after what I had said last night ?" exclaimed he hastily.

She rose from her knees slowly, and replied with dignity, " You said many unjust words last night, father, which I thought you were about to retract this morning. I am sorry to find I was mistaken."

" Do not let us misunderstand each other," said Mr. Ford, putting a strong curb upon himself. " You have offended me greatly by encouraging the secret addresses of a young man whose very name you know to be distasteful to your parents ; but I am willing to overlook your share in this clandestine courtship if you at once abandon your folly, and receive as my daughter should, the overtures of a man who saved my life, and whose love for you is worth more, thrice over, than that of a boy like young Latham."

" I love the *boy*, and I despise the man. I can *not* abandon the one, nor will I receive the other ! You are more unjust, father, than I ever knew you to be before. If you know little of George Latham you know less of Mr. Heywood ; and handsome as he is, I

am sure he is a bad man, for he has bad eyes, and a false mouth."

You are a daring, impudent girl, to stand there and traduce my best friend, in the same breath that you set my authority at naught. But, Alice, mark me, you shall *not* marry this Latham, if for no other reason than your perseverance and obstinacy ; and I insist that you see him no more."

" You compel me, father, to unmaidenly resistance ; I *must* see him, if but to say farewell. Do not deny me one interview !" and she clasped her father's hand imploringly ; but true to his perverse creed he shook her off, saying :

" Once for all I tell you, you shall *not* see him !"

" And once more, father, I reply I *must* !" and, so saying, Alice turned and left the room, with a bright red spot on either cheek, and a dull burning pain at her heart, which turned her almost sick. Unfit for household duties, she ascended the central staircase as though, at every step, she trod down an opposing something, and hurried to her own room to think in quiet. There she found her mother, dusting the speckless furniture for occupation until Alice should join her.

Oh mother, dear mother !" said Alice, what am I to do ? My father forbids my love, forbids me ever to see George. What shall I do ? If I meet him, I shall offend my father, so kind, so good, so very

good to me till now. If I obey my father, George will think me false, or fickle, or unjust. I must see him, mother, I *must*. I love him very, very dearly : he must be assured of my truth, and know that, even if parted, my love remains unchanged ! Oh, mother, mother !” and the girl sat on a chair swaying backwards and forwards in her intense agony.

“ Alice, my dear Alice, do not, do not give way thus. I wish you could think as your father thinks, it would be so much better, you know, for all of us ; I do not think there is much to choose between Mr. Latham and Mr. Heywood. Perhaps I like Mr. Latham a little the best ; but then he is a Latham, and Mr. Heywood is older, better able to take care of you (Michael was ten years older than herself) ; besides you know but for him your father might have been killed ; and then, you know, your father wishes you to marry him. I think you might try to oblige your father,” said she in a wavering and troubled voice.

“ Mother,” replied Alice, huskily, “ who did you oblige when you married ; was it uncle Luke ?”

“ Why, no ; not exactly ; you know uncle Luke did not wish me to leave him ; but then he gave his consent to oblige us.”

“ And so *you* married to oblige yourself and father ! And who did father *oblige*, besides himself and you ?

His father and mother?" asked Alice, quietly, but peculiarly.

"No, child, you know that well enough; you know they wanted him to marry his cousin to keep the money and estates in the family, but he would marry me in spite of them."

"And so both you and my father married to please yourselves and displease your relatives, yet you *think* I might marry Mr. Heywood to oblige my father;" and Alice repeated this in a tone of bitter sarcasm. "But I must and will see George once more, mother, I am determined, and Madam Latham, too, whatever comes of it; they shall not think me volatile and ungrateful!" and her compressed lips told that she meant what she said.

Ere her mother could overcome her astonishment at this outburst sufficiently to frame a reply, the resonant staircase and corridor conveyed to their ears the sound of a few rapid strokes of the ponderous knocker on the hall-door, announcing a visitor. The pulse of Alice stopped for an instant, then beat with quick vibration. Who was the visitor? Was it George? or Mr. Peover? or both? It could not be Mr. Heywood, surely, before his time; and her heart sank at the bare supposition.

The visitors (for there were two) were George and Mr. Peover, as whose companion the younger man ostensibly came, though in reality resolved, if an opportunity presented itself, to lose no time

in declaring to Mr. Ford his deep attachment to Alice, and beseeching his sanction. The opportunity came all too soon. They were ushered into the room Alice had so recently quitted, and that before Michael had recovered his equanimity. To Mr. Peover he was, as ever, the courteous gentleman; but there was an iciness in his reception of George, very foreign to his natural habits, which at once perplexed and chilled him.

Mr. Peover's sole object in this "morning call" was business, and in a short time both himself and Mr. Ford were engrossed with the consideration of matters of no interest whatever to the young lover, whose glance turned towards the door from time to time with a longing for the entrance of the dear one who held his heart in thrall. He felt, too, a strong inclination to turn the swing handle of the latch and quit the room in quest of Alice; the restraint of Michael's presence being a new and discomforting one. Having hitherto wandered over the premises unchecked save by his own inclination, and followed Alice in all her wanderings from room to room as a hindering assistant, this embargo on his locomotion was somewhat trying to an impulsive nature like his. It was very apparent that this was Mr. Ford's private room, but why both himself and the builder should be shown into it, particularly in its present state of disorder, rather than into the household apartment, he puzzled himself *very* pertinaciously to guess.

His doubts were resolved much earlier, and more rudely than had entered into his calculations. Business disposed of, Mr. Ford said, "You will find Mrs. Ford and Alice in the long parlour, I imagine, Mr. Peover. I am desirous of a little private conversation with your young friend" (not *my* young friend), "and they will be delighted to see you the while, if you will excuse ceremony."

"Oh, certainly, certainly; I shall be as glad to see them—as glad to see them;" and the jerky old man jumped from his chair, and was bowed from the room by Michael, who smiled sternly as he overheard the half-muttered ejaculation, "Whew! what's in the wind now—what's in the wind now?"

"Mr. Latham," said he, turning slowly round, and looking George full in the face, "I have discovered that you have presumed to solicit my daughter's affection unknown to me, and that this clandestine love-making has been going on for years. What have you to say for this dishonourable conduct?"

His peremptory question and unexpected accusation somewhat staggered George; but strong in the inner consciousness of the rectitude of his own motives and intentions, he answered Michael promptly and unfalteringly.

"Only this, Mr. Ford, that you are prejudging me. I admit I have loved your daughter for years, but I deny the clandestine love-making, until her presence

under my own roof, in her matured womanly beauty, forced the confession from me. And I repudiate the charge of dishonour, having come hither this day with the express intention of disclosing to you the secret of our loves, and asking your sanction."

"And you expect me to believe this, young gentleman, do you?" asked Michael, with a palpable sneer; "a very probable story, truly. It is not customary for young men to encumber themselves with old ones on such errands. Had I not forced the admission from you, I should have heard nothing of this. The subterfuge is a disgrace to you, or would be, were you not a Latham."

"Mr. Ford, no other man dared have said to me what you have said this morning. I have a quick temper, and seldom brook insult; but from the father of Alice I can bear much. I repeat, I came this morning to seek your consent to my courtship of your daughter, not doubting a courteous reception, and hoping, by straightforward dealing, to overcome your prejudices against my family name."

"It is all very well to tell me this now, Mr. Latham," said Michael, rather testily, "but you cannot change my belief."

"I regret it," answered George, seriously, "lest it should influence your decision now, for the question is broached; and I ask earnestly that you will consider the matter without pique or prejudice, for the happy-

ness of two lives depends upon it. May I hope to have your sanction of my suit?" and George looked as though the word of Michael were irrevocable fate, and life and love depended on it.

"No! emphatically no!" answered Michael, harshly. "By what right do you accuse me of prejudice? You have overshot your mark, Mr. Latham; I give my daughter to no man who makes love to her before asking my leave. I give my daughter to no man, whatever his wealth, who idles his time away unprofitably, instead of following some useful occupation; nor do I give my daughter to any man whose name would disgrace her."

"Oh, Mr. Ford, this is indeed prejudice. I honestly forbore the declaration of my love whilst Alice, dear Alice, was too young to act for herself, and for two years nourished an unstimulated passion, in the vague hope of some day wooing her with your full concurrence. The uncontrollable joy of meeting her once more after our long severance, was too much for my resolution. I was but mortal; the flood-gates of my heart were loosened, and words gushed forth I would not now recall even if I had the power, for Alice was won."

"Not quite," was practical Mr. Ford's interruption of this impetuous speech, with its injudicious termination; "not quite; my consent had to be gained, and that you are not likely to have. In short I have pro-

mised my daughter's hand to a worthy business man, who loves her quite as well as you do, though he has not yet favoured me with a rhodomontade speech like the specimen I have had from you. My girl must marry him, and so I have told her."

"But she does not love him, Mr. Ford," remonstrated George, in tones of bitter anguish.

"Then she must learn to love him. The girl is young, and the man is handsome, rich, and elegant, and a thorough business man. What more can she require?"

"Without love she will never see these perfections, and Alice loves me. Oh, Mr. Ford, I entreat you to re-consider your decision. My happiness or misery may not concern you, but for the sake of dear, dear Alice, whose happiness I know is linked with mine, be generous, and give us to each other!"

"I will do nothing of the kind, sir; my decision is irrevocable, and Alice knows it. And I must desire that you seek no interview with the girl, to warp her mind, or tempt her to disobedience. For your attention to my wife, and your hospitality, I thank you; but your design on my daughter almost robs these civilities of their grace. You will consider us henceforth as strangers, Mr. Latham, and so my daughter will have to regard you." So saying, Michael pulled the bell-rope.

"Mr. Ford, I have a due regard for parental

authority, but I love Alice too well to resign her to any man without a struggle. I have *asked* your consent: having refused it, henceforth I must act for Alice and myself as necessity and Providence shall determine." He spoke this firmly, yet calmly, though his heart beat wildly; and as he concluded, Peggy came to the door in answer to the bell.

"Tell Mr. Peover that Mr. Latham awaits him here," was Michael's order to the young woman, who dropped a curtsey and retired. No further words passed until Mr. Peover returned, then he shook hands with Mr. Ford, and bade "good day," whilst a stiff bow was all the leave-taking between Michael and Mr. Latham.

And so George Latham turned away from the Grange with a disconsolate and hopeless heart, tortured with apprehensions lest Alice should be driven to desert him against her own will; jealous of the Mr. Heywood, now so formidable, and half mad with the fear that they might meet no more or meet as strangers. How many young hearts suffer agony like this, while the world moves on as heretofore, and their sorrows are but as grains of sand on the shores of Time!

Well he knew the window of his darling, and he turned when within range to cast an eager look upwards. Alice was there; she clasped her hands

with sudden joy, he kissed his hand to her repeatedly, and she replied.

And then he went his way, his grief a little lightened by that brief glimpse of the watching maiden. And Alice kept her room that day under the genuine plea of head-ache ; that intense head-ache inseparable from a woman's heart-ache.

## CHAPTER XII.

## WHAT WILL IT LEAD TO?

THE sharp frost had been succeeded by a rapid thaw, and the thaw had been closely followed by a drizzling rain, which came down pitilessly the whole of Friday and Saturday, nor ceased its droppings on the Sunday. More pitiless, however, had been the drizzling rain of little duties Michael had showered on the hands of Alice, with the double motive of keeping her thoughts from wandering—or her *feet*. He was by no means sure that she did not meditate a walk to Latham Lodge, even through the rain; so he called her to assist in putting his own room into order; then desired her to examine Mr. Peover's accounts, and that she found by no means an easy task: over and over again she added up the sundry items, but the figures seemed to dance about and change places, so every time the total varied; and only a very strong mental effort enabled her to concentrate her thoughts so as to overcome the difficulty. After that, when the candles were lit for the long evening, he required a tune on the old harpischord,

and after tea challenged her to a game at back-gammon.

Saturday—

“The day on which odd matters are made even ;  
The dirtiest, cleanest too, of all the seven”—

of course brought its own amount of routine duties to her amongst the rest ; but Michael superadded the unpacking and arrangement of books on the shelves of the new book-case ; and congratulated himself at the close of the day that he had kept her so fully employed.

On Sunday he would fain have detained her from church, lest she should there meet with Mr. Latham, and he urged the rain as an excuse ; but Alice came down provided with cloak, and hood, and pattens, and umbrella (the umbrella her father had bought for her as a special gift, the first she had possessed ; the only one save her mother's in the whole establishment, or perhaps in all Shotwick), so Michael thought it advisable to accompany her, and consoled himself with the notion, that as they would have to attend the same church, the sooner the difficulty of keeping Mr. Latham aloof was surmounted the better.

In most country churches there is a family pew attached to the great “house” of the neighbourhood ; but in Shotwick were two great houses, and consequently two conspicuous pews, on opposite sides of the building, as the Lodge and the Grange were

almost at opposite angles of the village. The Grenville pew, so long a fold without a flock, now shone resplendent in the new pomp and vanity of crimson curtains and brass rods; and as Michael preceded Alice up the aisle, and ushered her into the exclusive sanctuary, they were followed by the curious eyes of more than rustic worshippers. With the prosy sermon of the once rollicking fox-hunting parson, now heavy as his homilies, we have nothing to do ; it might or might not awaken the sleeping conscience of a solitary sinner in the crowd ; our story lies with those who should have sat and listened, but who for the most part sat and looked at each other with longing eyes, until Michael rose and closed an intervening curtain.

At the conclusion of the service the villagers respectfully kept their seats until the gentry had left their pews, and led the way ; there was no rude jostling and shuffling to escape the sacred precincts, such as too often disgrace modern fashionable churches, as though they were theatres or concert-halls. Here reigned order and decorum, inspired perhaps not merely by veneration for things sacred, but that awe of superior wealth and station, not altogether confined to the vulgar. Thus it was that in spite of Michael's manœuvring, Alice and George passed down the aisle together, and into the porch. Their hands met and closed on each other ; then her pattens had to be selected from a group and adjusted,

for the pretty feet to slip beneath their bands ; the umbrella to be unfurled and expanded ; and George was by her side and at her service, and though words were few, the hands met once more, in utter disregard of the frowns of Mr. Ford, who could not well make the church-porch a scene of contention, albeit he hurried his daughter away with little ceremony, and less leave-taking. But that reassuring pressure of the hands had defeated all Michael's policy of estrangement ; in fact, the estrangement seemed growing up between himself and child, not between the girl and her lover.

After the first few angry words which told Michael's displeasure, the homeward path through the village and the fields was trod in silence, not so much the result of sullenness, as the consciousness of discord in their feelings and intentions.

Alice hastened to her chamber as soon as she reached home, and only left it in obedience to a summons to dinner, contrary to her ordinary custom, which was, to lay the cloth, draw the ale, and facilitate matters in many little ways not tending to disarrange the Sunday robes. Michael grumbled at this innovation, and hoped she was not growing lazy as well as love-sick and disobedient, for he hated laziness in man or woman. Signs of an ill change and an altered spirit creeping over the dividing family. Had the change of heart come with the change of hearth ?

But Alice was not lazy ; she only could not bear to meet her father's altered eye, or hear the harsh tones of his once kind voice, and sedulously avoided his presence, lest he should say aught respecting her rival suitors likely to provoke an undutiful rejoinder from herself. After that rebuke of his, however, she kept clear of the imputation of idleness, and busied herself as usual, not only in superintendence of domestic matters, to lighten her mother's household cares, but in active co-operation wherever assistance was most needed.

That day, at all events, passed over as no other Sabbath in their home had ever done. Peggy and Betty, and Sally, the new maid, went to church in the afternoon as had been the custom in Northwich, attended by Dick, and Ben, the cow-boy, but Michael did not surrender himself to an afternoon nap in his arm-chair as was his wont, there was an uneasy suspicion in his mind that would not let him sleep, or suffer Alice out of his sight long together. He called her to the harpsichord, and she played for him anthems and chants, and snatches from oratorios, but with a heart far away from her finger-ends, and so the music was flat and spiritless. Weary of that, he desired her to read to him, and Bunyan's Pilgrim was introduced, but Christian fled from the City of Destruction, floundered through the Slough of Despond, and made his way to the Wicket Gate, without producing other

effect on hearer or listener than “words, mere words;” Margaret alone (from whose mind the recent commotion was passing away) listened with interest, not the less profound because the book was being re-read for the dozenth time. The servants returned from church, tea was provided and despatched, Michael lit his pipe and smoked, but in uncomfortable silence, whilst Alice read, or pretended to read, a volume recently purchased by her father, Johnson’s *Rasselias*.

It was not that the rain fell at intervals, or that the yet unilled grounds were cheerless, or that the long room was dreary in itself, or strange, or that the rest from active labour was wearisome, or that sacred music, or the wondrous allegory were not congenial to their minds: these had been oft-recurring things; the change had naught to do with these externals, it was the inner change, the disunion in their hearts, which desolated the Sabbath, and made the laughter from the neighbouring kitchen sound harsh and discordant.

But weary days or pleasant ones alike come to an end, and at an earlier hour than ordinary the whole family retired to rest. Slumber had sealed every eyelid many hours, when sleep was broken by an unearthly shriek, and flying footsteps rushed along the corridor. The sleepers were awakened; the heavy servants turned over in their beds, and thought “how troublesome them rats wur.”

Alice fancied she had been dreaming, and again composed herself to sleep within the shelter of the sky-blue curtains, which, by the way, had served to deaden the sound. Mrs. Ford was disposed to similar impressions, had not Michael started from his bed and rushed into the corridor.

All was silent, and so dark his eyes could not penetrate the gloom, but no spectre was visible, no human being was there, to waken the silence even by a breath; and he returned to his bed, muttering, for his wife's satisfaction, something that sounded like "those rats again!"

Of his private thoughts he said nothing; perhaps it would have been difficult to analyze them; but it is certain, had he possessed that undiscovered luxury, a lucifer match, or any more expeditious appliance for procuring a light than the patience-trying tinder-box, flint, and steel, he would not have left the mystery without another attempt at a solution. As it was, he thought it better to conceal his own suspicions, vague as they were, lest he should rouse the very apprehensions he was so anxious to allay.

At breakfast the next morning, Alice related to her father her "singular dream," and her mother, in much surprise, told, as a remarkable coincidence, how the "rats" had awakened herself and Michael. Of anything beyond she said nothing, no idea of ghost or goblin having crossed her mind. Nor did

he think proper to reveal the discovery he had made early that morning in the cheese-room, when, under pretence of counting the cheeses, he had gone once more to explore the haunted chamber.

He had found the cheeses which had previously been ranged in rows according to age, rolled about the room in indiscriminate confusion, and, where the boards had been planed down to efface the blood-stains, the bloody marks still there as fresh as though the suicide had been committed but the day before. Aghast, he had stood for awhile, gazing at the crimson stains, but soon his strong practical mind overcame all other feelings, and he began to replace the cheeses in their places, lest other eyes should see the disorder —a tough job, as Cheshire cheeses are seldom light weights. But he had covered up the offending spots, and trusted the cheeses might not be so disturbed again; and true to his creed—which ignored the existence, or rather the return of spirits to the spot of their earthly sojourn—Michael maintained strict silence as to the re-appearance of the tragic stains.

His moodiness Alice ascribed to causes connected with herself, having no suspicion of the true state of the case. From his reverie he was, however, disturbed by a loud Tan-ta-ra-ta-ra! tan-ta-ra-ta-ra! from the long tin horn of the post-boy, who came every Monday and Thursday with letters (when there

were any to bring), and carried away with him any provided against his advent, for transmission elsewhere. "Post paid," said Peggy, as she placed two letters on the table before her master, and proceeded to clear away the breakfast equipage, in which Alice assisted, not, however, without some latent curiosity about the letters; for Michael had but few correspondents, and something told her those were not either from farmers or cheese-factors, and related neither to cattle nor grain.

"Eh! what! um!" ejaculated he, as he took up the smaller of these epistles, turned it from side to side, and, as if debating a point with himself, read the superscription aloud, "Miss Ford, Grenville Grange." Alice almost dropped the dish she was removing, but she steadied her nerves to carry it to the kitchen and return with a composure of features strangely at variance with her palpitating heart. Meanwhile Michael had turned over and over the missive, curiously folded to puzzle prying eyes, debating within himself whether to read it, return it unread (he had no doubt about the writer), or to throw it in the fire at once. He could be stern and peremptory, but he shrank from a dishonourable action, and though there was a nervous twitching of his mouth, evincing strong temptation, honour prevailed; and he at length reluctantly tossed the letter to Alice, saying, "Take thy love letter, Alice, but

mark, if there come any more from the same quarter, I burn them!"

Taking it eagerly, with burning cheeks she hastened to her own little room to read it in solitude, unmindful of the remaining letter, which concerned her quite as nearly, though she did not know it. Nor, in her eagerness to depart with her prize, did she catch the exclamatory observation of her father, as he raised the other letter and broke the seal. "Robert Heywood! why, I could have sworn it was from that Latham; perhaps, after all, the letter I have given Ailsie is from Robert. If not, why then I never saw two hands more alike in my life." And, to a casual observer, this was the case; had the calligraphy of both been formed from the same model, they could scarcely have been more similar, and yet there was an individuality about each, indicative of the character of the writer. The one told legibly in its careless, open flow, the hurried impetuosity of George Latham; the other, in its systematic ease, showed forth the smooth, deliberate craft of Robert Heywood. Had one man penned the twain in different moods, they could not have borne a closer resemblance; and, yet they differed, widely as did the characters of the two men.

Alice locked herself in her little sitting-room before she ventured to unfold the precious billet, precious as being her first love letter; doubly precious, circumstanced as she and her lover were. How the girl

kissed the senseless paper ; how her fingers trembled as she unsheathed the scissors, suspended by a chain from her girdle, to cut her letter open, lest she should injure the seal, bearing the Latham crest. Not, however, because of that impression, but for the sake of him whose seal it was, whose pen had traced these earnest lines :—

“ MY DARLING, ALICE,—I have seen and spoken to your father, and the result is worse than even you anticipated. He may have told you, dearest, of our stormy interview, but I question whether he would tell you my resolve. You may know—he said you did—that he not only disapproves our union, but forbids our intercourse, and would sunder us for ever, and all to give you to that man whom I cannot bring myself to name, for whom I have conceived a strong antipathy. I may be wrong, Alice, in thus prejudging a man I have never seen, only because he loves where I do : if so, blame not me, but my deep love which could not resign you to an emperor. My Alice, mine ! You are mine, Alice, you have declared it, and those dear lips could never frame a falsehood ; and, being mine in heart, by your own admission, I will not resign the right you have given me. I told your father this as my resolve. Will you, my dear Alice, bear me out in that reply ? How tantalizing was our meeting this morning at church. I could only look

at you lovingly, with thoughts wandering widely from the service, and hope for speech when the tedious sermon was over. How brief was the clasp of that dear hand, yet it thrilled through my whole frame. How bitter it was to part from you with scarce the words of common friendship, when my heart was in a tumult with its hopes and fears. But, I grow selfish, Alice, thus to ponder on my own sorrow, nor think of yours. I saw the sad lines in your face, darling, and knew that your trouble was akin to mine. Alice, my own Alice, this cannot go on ; we *must* meet again, and *soon*. Together we might decide on some plan to reverse your father's harsh decision. I cannot come to you, the door is closed against me. Come hither, Alice ; my mother's presence will sanction the visit in the eyes of propriety, and I know she desires to see you. If you do not come within a day or two, I shall conclude you are a prisoner, or that these lines have not reached your hand. I would be the last, dear love, to counsel disobedience, and my dear mother would never sanction that which is wrong, yet she approves our loves, and preaches 'fidelity' and 'trust in Providence.' Come, Alice ; I shall remain within the house, tortured with fears, until I see you. If you love me, *come*.

"Thine, in love and fear,

"GEORGE LATHAM."

How often these loving lines were read and re-read; how many kisses were rained upon the signature, how many tears fell over it, would be difficult to say, but it is certain that the letter strengthened the young girl's determination to have a final interview with the writer, if but to part for ever, a result she dreaded next to death.

When Alice returned to the long room, her father was in the shippions, but had left Mr. Heywood's letter open for her perusal. Mrs. Ford, who was unfolding a parcel, handed it to her, with the remark, "Will not it be pleasant?" "Pleasant!" repeated Alice, as she read these words :—

"MY DEAR MR. FORD,—Convey to Mrs. Ford and your dear daughter the extreme gratification I have in being at liberty to accept your kind invitaton for Christmas. I was for some time apprehensive that business would detain me in Manchester; but I find I can be spared, and lose no time in making you acquainted with the, to me, agreeable fact. May I hope that when I arrive at the Grange on Christmas Eve, I shall find you all in health, and meet as warm a reception from Miss Ford as I know your good lady and yourself will extend to

"Yours in sincerity,

"ROBERT HEYWOOD."

"Mother," said Alice, as she put the letter back on the table, "do you really think it will be pleasant to have Mr. Heywood here during the Christmas?"

"Yes, my dear, I do; he is a very agreeable, nice young gentleman, and, as we have no society here, I am sure we ought to be very glad he is coming to dissipate the dulness of the place. Besides, he is very greatly attached to you, and will, I am sure, do all in his power to make his visit a delightful one."

"Oh, mother, mother, can you so forget your own young days as to think it will be pleasant to sit and listen to Mr. Heywood, to converse with him, to dance, or sing, or play for his amusement, while my heart is throbbing wildly for one I love dearly, who is thrust aside to make room for that man, whom I all but detest? This visit will be anything but pleasant to me."

"You will think differently soon, my child. George Latham is, I own, a very attractive young gentleman, and I have nothing to say against him; but, then, he is very young, and young men are very changeable. And so are you very young. I dare say you will forget all about him before long; at least, I hope so; for your father has set his mind on having Mr. Heywood for a son-in-law, and if you disappoint him, it would be a great trouble to us both."

"What should you have done, mother, if uncle Luke had forbidden your marriage with father?"

“ Dear me, Alice, what a question ! I’m sure I don’t know. Uncle Luke did not want me to marry at all ; but, then, your father was so pertinacious and so determined, and I loved him so much, that uncle Luke very soon gave way, for he was not very obstinate or implacable.”

“ And my father is both ; there lies the difference. Well, mother, it would be a great trouble to you if I married Mr. Heywood, and we were badly matched ; and to George Latham and myself the trouble would be life-long. But if I never marry, I will not marry Robert Heywood ; and unless I marry George, I shall die an old maid. So father and you will have to think well about it. I love as my father loved, once and for ever.”

“ Dear me, child, I am afraid your obstinacy and your father’s resolution will together cause a great deal of unhappiness to us all. What a pity you cannot be ruled by your good father’s wishes,” and Margaret looked as much troubled as it was possible for her to look.

“ What is in that parcel, mother ?” said Alice, to change the painful subject.

“ Oh, that is the dress Mr. Heywood made me a present of ; I must have it made up before he comes, or he will think I set no store by it. I want you to go to Shotwick and see if that school-fellow of yours, Phœbe Horne, can make it for me. If she served her

time with Mrs. Hopley, she ought to be a very excellent mantua-maker; and I do not want a couple of journeys to Chester about a dress."

"When do you wish me to go?" asked Alice, endeavouring to conceal her too palpable satisfaction.

"At once," replied her mother; there is not much time to lose. Phœbe is likely to be busy just now for Christmas, and it must be made. Suppose you go as soon as dinner is over. And now I bethink me, Alice, you had better go and see to the dinner, for Betty is churning, and Sally's in the press-room skimming the curds and straining off the whey. Sally says the copper flue does not draw well, and she's in a very ill-temper over it. So go and help dinner on, that's a good girl."

Alice went accordingly, but had not been in the bright kitchen many minutes when her mother called her back into the adjoining room. "See, Alice, what I have found in the folds of this dress; it is not mine; what is it; do you think it of any consequence?" said she, holding up a letter. Alice opened and glanced lightly over it; then, saying, "No, I think it is only waste paper," crushed it up in her hand as she returned to the kitchen and tossed it into the ashes. What was that sudden impulse which caused her almost immediately to stoop and rescue the scorching paper from the hot embers? Why should she seek to preserve that which she had just pronounced

"waste paper?" Had she been asked, she could not have told. It was one of those inscrutable impulses to which there is no clue ; one of those minute pivots on which lives hang, regarded by the thoughtless as fortuitous circumstances, by the reflective as Providential interpositions.

Being busy just then, Alice put the paper in her pocket as it was, thinking to examine it more closely at her leisure ; and then, with her fingers deep in flour and the mysteries of pie and pudding making, forgot all about that letter for thinking of the one lying close to her beating heart, and the other on the parlour table.

Dinner was cooked and eaten ; and, whilst her father strode about the new farmyard and stables superintending the housing of provender and other arrangements not yet completed, Alice, before her new oval swing glass, changed her dress, and tied the strings of cloak and hat, more with the haste of one to whom moments are precious, than the studious or coquettish care which contemplates a conquest with a curl. She was never vain, and now her heart was troubled with weightier matters than her own appearance ; yet never had she been more lovely. Love and thought at once gave lustre and depth to her soft brown eyes ; expectant hope tinged her cheek with the hue of a June rose ; anxiety parted the red lips, giving a glimpse of pearly teeth beyond ; and her

decided purpose gave to her carriage more than its common dignity.

Chartered with her mother's errand she stepped from the portals of the Grange, trod with a firm quick step the long straight gravelled drive, swung back one heavy gate, and was out in the road, beyond observation from the window ; and the dosing griffins gave no alarm, for was she not a daughter of the house, and privileged to come and go unquestioned ? Phœbe was not at home, but as Ralph said, “ Wur still at th' Lodge wi Madame Latham.”

Matthew Spark, lounging on the horse-block, with a mug of ale by his hand, hearing the enquiry for the innkeeper's pretty daughter, started up instantly, saying respectfully, yet eagerly, “ I'll run to th' Lodge for Phœbe, wi a' th' pleasure in th' world, if Miss Ford has getten aught for her to do.”

“ Thank you, I will go to her,” replied Alice, whose gratification at this opportune excuse, only equalled Matthew's disappointment, for the blacksmith's heart could beat, even when his hammer lay idle.

“ Perhaps you will have the goodness to point out the nearest way to the Lodge,” said Alice, addressing with a pleasant smile the knight of the leathern apron and rueful countenance.

“ Oi'll be downreeght proud to show you, Miss ; th' road's as crook'd as a horse's shoen an' yo' moightn

tak' th' wrung turnin'. It wunne be th' least trouble, it wunna indeed," affirmed Matthew, as she expressed her disinclination to trouble him; then turning to Ralph he said, "An' yo' anny message for Phœbe or anny on 'em up yonder, Mister Horne?" indicating "up yonder" with a jerk of his turned back thumb.

"Naw, I hanna anything to say—yea, tell the lass that Whistler bolted last night, fleered wi' a bogle in Shotwick lone. Dunna thee let Mister Latham hear, or mebbe he'd—" *what*—was expressed in a whisper and a nod, and Alice hastened on with her guide—equally pleased—the lady and the rude blacksmith with the slight excuse which served as a key to the casket where love was shrined. Through the church-yard he conducted her respectfully, down a by lane, across a meadow, and thence through a rustic alley, where in summer the high hedges almost met overhead, to shade this "lovers' walk," which terminated at a tall green door, opening into the Latham grounds, in the rear of the mansion. There Matthew took leave of the young lady, making his questionable message a pretext for a word with Phœbe, while Alice hurried to the front entrance with a heart which was its own excuse.

The hall door was open, and George on the broad top step, stood leaning with his arms folded across the iron rail in front, looking down the drive

with eyes that pierced the distance, watching far off for the graceful figure so close at hand. And so absorbed was he in his earnest scrutiny of the wide open gate, and the road beyond, that Alice mounted the side steps and touched him ere he saw her. With a delighted exclamation he clasped her in an impassioned embrace, and drew her unresistingly into the wide hall, and the room she remembered so well. There he told her how he had been watching wearily, hopelessly for signs of her approach, all the dreary day, and pressed her closer to his breast as he declared his rapture at her presence. As for Alice, but for his supporting arm, she would have fallen; she had braved her father's anger in coming, had nerved herself for the meeting; but when she was by his side, in his embrace, under his own roof, a sense of impropriety, of a want of maidely reserve, crossed her mind for the first time, and in shame and confusion she strove to release herself from his arms, as she enquired anxiously for his mother.

"She is dozing by the fire in the drawing-room, dear love, you shall see her presently. But what is this? Why do you struggle to free yourself from my clasp? Do you so soon regret the grace you have accorded me? You do not surely repent coming?" asked he, releasing her, and speaking with laboured breath.

"Indeed I do repent, dear George. I fear I have

done wrong in seeking you here," said she, sadly, with downcast eyes.

"Had we been differently circumstanced, Alice, this might have been wrong; but situated as we are, dear love, no one with a spark of feeling could blame us. Do not reproach yourself with that which fills me with the deepest gratitude; and do not look so anxiously at the door, we need not yet disturb mother (would we could say our mother), she will awake presently, and then I will take you to her." So saying he led her once more to the sofa by the fire, and though she opposed it at first, removed her hat and cloak; then seating himself by her side, drew her head upon his shoulder, and bending his own to look into her eyes, or kiss her loving lips, the sunny chestnut curls, and the black locks mingled once more, as did their sighs and sympathies.

But this was not a meeting for endearment only, the first blissful moments gone, serious thoughts and anxious care filled their young minds. Her father's determination and probable motives for discarding him in favour of Mr. Heywood were seasoned and debated; next the threatened visit; and then came the question of the future.

"I cannot meet you again, George, thus, nor at all, unless my father's mood should change, and that is far from likely. When he learns my visit here to-day his displeasure will be great, I know; and I cannot

repeat it. We must trust in each other, and in Time's changes, under the directing hand of Providence. You have faith in my constancy, have you not, dear George?"

" Faith in your constancy, yes, but not in your resolution ; I dread lest you should succumb to coercion. Besides, there will be a handsome, and, I fear, a wily man by your side, ready to take advantage of every incident, every change of circumstance or feeling, to warp your affection, or turn the current in his own favour. I cannot endure the prospect of that man's familiar presence by your side, his licensed advances, the liberty of look and speech and touch accorded by your parents, if not by yourself. Alice, I see such a picture before me as drives me mad with jealousy." And as he spoke, George Latham started from the sofa, and paced the floor, with one hand over his eyes, as though to shut out the sight he contemplated. Alice sat silent, watching him with a sad and troubled countenance, unknowing from what store to impart consolation. " And what must be the end of this, Alice ?" resumed he, pausing in his walk. " Am I to sit down quietly in this old hall, and brood over the possible love-scenes at the Grange, tending to as possible a marriage in the end, and make no effort to break the spell, make no attempt to see you, nor dare to repeat my claim ? By heaven, I will not ! I should be a mouse and not a man, if I suffered a

rival to supplant me, while I sat tamely by and let him woo." And as he said this he strode about yet more impatiently.

"George, you are unjust to me, and selfish ; had I foreseen this jealous outburst, I should have paused before I dared my father's anger to come hither," interrupted Alice, sadly, but proudly.

"Pardon me, Alice ; I do forget myself whenever I think of our separation. We had been severed so long, the bliss of reunion was so new, and the cup of joy had been dashed down so suddenly and roughly, that I am almost beside myself, and may be both selfish and unjust. Jealousy never yet was any other. Forgive me, love!" and he took her hand in his as he resumed his seat by her side, and drew the rippling curls again to his shoulder.

"The moments are slipping by very fast, dear George," said she, "and all I came to say is yet unsaid. I do forgive you, for love must pardon jealousy ; yet true love has faith in its object as in itself. Never, never, dishonour my memory by another doubt, however long we may be parted. Mr. Heywood will be nothing to me but a persecuting shadow, and you must follow me with pity, not jealous fancy. I have told my father that I will not marry him, and I mean to keep my word. Whether I become your wife or not depends upon yourself."

"If I could only feel assured of that," ejaculated he, a gleam of hope lighting up his countenance.

"You may! I will marry none other, believe me. If your fidelity only equals mine, and your patience, I shall be yours some day, however far off that day may be. So take heart, dear George, and all may yet be well," said Alice, looking up into his face with an encouraging smile.

"My darling Alice, you shame me; I was fool enough to mistake your self-control for indifference. I can promise fidelity, but patience, Alice—don't ask it. I exhausted all my stock in the past two years; it is a lesson I shall hardly learn again. I have tasted the delirious joy of your acknowledged love, and patience under separation now, and for an indefinite time, is not to be thought of. I will think of you ever with the purest devotion, the strongest faith, but patience, my Alice, under such a trial is not in the list of my virtues. Patience! the very word sounds like mockery. I cannot be patient!" and as he said so, there was a hopeless despondence in his tone, indicating the trial separation would be to him. But a cheerful light overspread his face as he added, "We shall at least, dear Alice, meet at church each week, if only as friends, and we may write to each other; that will be some solace in absence."

"*Nas!* no; my father threatens to burn any letters

you send. He hesitated to give me the one I have," was her mournful response.

" Then he must not have the opportunity. I will find a messenger. Does Mr. Ford employ any of the villagers?"

" Yes, Matthew Spark and Miles Wood have both been working for him ; and my excuse for leaving the house now was to engage Phœbe to make a dress for mother. But that reminds me, there was a singular letter caught between the folds of the silk ; this is it." As Alice spoke she drew from her side-pocket (a separate article of apparel, not changed with the dress) the crumpled epistle, and opened it for re-examination. Sitting side by side as they did, George's eye glanced over it with hers, but as he read his gaze seemed riveted upon the paper, and his very lips grew white.

" Where did you get this, Alice ?" inquired he, after a pause, and with low deliberate tone, and some anxiety.

" Between the folds of a silk dress Mr. Heywood gave to mother. But what do you see in the letter to agitate you so ?"

" You have heard of my profligate uncle, who caused Mistress Grenville's death, have you not ?"

" Certainly ; but what connection has he with that letter ?"

" He wrote it, Alice ; I could swear to the hand

among a thousand. The peculiar capitals, and sprawling irregularity, are unmistakable. And what connection has he with Mr. Heywood? If any, then is Mr. Heywood a bad man indeed, one to be doubted and watched—watched closely. Let us read it again, my love, and together strive to solve the strange enigma."

It was the letter Mr. Heywood had found waiting at the Northwich post-office, and the superscription identified it with himself, the postmarks gave it date and locality, but the correspondence was too carefully couched in double-meaning to be understood without a clue. George, however, read and commented.

" 'Snow has melted, and the dust is laid!' There was no snow in October. 'Welsh flannels to hand, marketable at a premium.' "

"Oh, those were goods delayed on the road, for which he had bartered others in Chester fair," explained Alice.

"Perhaps, my dear. I doubt everything that comes under my uncle's pen. 'What of the new speculation? How long had he known you, Alice?'" asked George, sharply.

"Only two days!"

"Only two days; then the '*speculation*' could scarcely be an allusion to you—scarcely; yet my uncle is a thorough villain—and who knows," mused George, pondering the mysterious document.

"Who knows *what*, George?"

"How great a rascal Mr. Heywood may be! Alice, you had better leave this paper with me—it may be useful. Uncle Jeffrey may have done us a good turn unwittingly; it will be the first good thing he ever did in his life if he has. I must watch Mr. Heywood, and guard you, if necessary, from his schemes, for I feel sure now, he is not an upright tradesman. And you must not scruple to write to me, my dearest; Phœbe will be a true and sure emissary. She is to be trusted with anything but men's hearts, and those are playthings in her coquettish little hands. She holds two in thrall now—more's the pity. Will you, Alice, promise to correspond with me thus?"

"I will think of it, George; I do not believe your mother would approve of the clandestine intercourse. But I have outstayed my time far, I must see her at once—and Phœbe."

Sadly acquiescing in the necessity for her departure, he led her to his mother, who rose, with surprise and pleasure, to greet her on her entrance. Alice threw her arms round the kind old lady's neck, and wept the tears hitherto restrained. She lacked the support and counsel of such a mother, and unconsciously to herself her heart made the discovery, and an invidious distinction. To Mrs. Latham she apologized for her seeming courtesy, in avoiding Latham Lodge, on the strong ground of her father's interdict; and

deprecated harsh judgment on that visit—with the plea of necessity and urgency. How much was she consoled when the old lady, smoothing down her glossy hair, as she held her by her side, said quietly : “ Filial obedience, my dear daughter (I will still call you so), is a great duty, but there is a point beyond which duty cannot pass, and obedience becomes weakness, if not absolutely culpable. I trust, Alice, your father will not strain authority to that point, when disobedience becomes a necessity. I may not invite you hither again in the face of your father’s will, nor can I advise you to meet my son under such unfavourable auspices ; but as I know him worthy of a good, true woman’s love, I say be faithful to him, and all may yet be better than the present promises.”

She seemed in doubt about a secret correspondence, until George displayed the letter rescued from the ashes, and explained how it was obtained. Then, without hesitation, she bade Alice communicate to her son all she could glean respecting Mr. Heywood, even apparent trifles.

Phœbe was now called in, and with much difficulty was prevailed upon to wait on Mrs. Ford the next day, her terror of the Grange being not overcome by the fact of its colonization. No inducement would suffice to take her there that afternoon now the twilight was deepening.

Tea was brought in, but Alice would not remain,

and so George Latham hastily thrust his arms in his great coat, and assumed his right to escort and guard her home. It was a sad walk that, and would have been sadder but for the discovery they had made ; for George, ever sanguine, held it to be hopeful in its auguries for himself, if used rightly, to confound Mr. Heywood, and open Michael's eyes. The plantation was dark, but they were too much engrossed in each other to heed the gloom ; for the bitter agony of that terrible and uncertain parting shut out trivialities, leaving nothing but the dismal blank of separation before them. How they tore themselves apart, and said farewell at last ; with what lingering kisses, what tones and looks of anguish, let those recall who have loved as well, and parted as painfully. Those whose lives have been smooth, and loves sunny, could not understand, if it were mirrored before them.

## CHAPTER XIII.

## PHŒBE'S PUZZLE.

FROM the troubles of George Latham and Alice, we may revert, by natural transition, to the perplexities of pretty Phœbe Horne, and her two rustic admirers, whom she encouraged or repulsed according as her fitful moods alternated, and kept in a continual state of suspense as to her ultimate intentions regarding them, until at length she was no wise clear in her own mind on the subject, and became not a little perplexed how to decide so as to deliver herself from a dilemma.

When Madame Latham, compassionating the orphan girl's situation, neglected education, and want of proper companionship, sent her to the Misses Briscoe's school, it was not with the intention of fitting her for a sphere beyond her own, but simply to remove her from the great risk of moral contamination, and enable her to acquire that elementary knowledge necessary for any station, and which her own mother would have doubtless imparted had she lived. But

when she returned home finally for the "long vacation," and Madame Latham saw that she was endowed with much more dangerous gifts than the "little learning," pronounced so dangerous by Pope, that she was, in short, not a little pretty—and just a little vain, the good lady felt that a country inn was about one of the worst homes for her, so long as she had no permanent occupation to keep her aloof from the customers—whether country clowns or country squires—the manners and morals of neither, at that period, being in general much above par. With a view to remove Phœbe from such associates, and much temptation, the good lady placed her in Mrs. Hopley's workroom, paying a heavy premium for the initiation of the girl into the art and mysteries of fashionable dressmaking. From the realms of brocade and taffeta, Phœbe emerged, quite as pretty, not less vain, and, moreover, somewhat coquettish to boot. This, Madame Latham observed with much regret and some apprehension, and many were the quiet lectures she bestowed on her *protégé* to counteract these evil influences.

It might have been supposed that so sage and prudent a matron would have kept this pretty village belle as far apart from her only and idolized son as possible; and, probably, had his heart been to her a "sealed book," such would have been her endeavour, but she knew there was a talisman in his breast which made him Phœbe-proof; and, so the girl spent much

of her time at the Lodge, either with Madame Latham or at work in the housekeeper's room. But, if there was a love-shield over the heart of George Latham, there were those in the village not quite so impenetrable ; and, occasional travellers passing through the village, and stopping to bait at the Black Bear, fell at times into the trap pretty Phœbe's dimples set for the unwary.

Of all her conquests, the two most conspicuous were Matthew Spark and Miles Wood ; but, whether she smiled on both with equal complacency, whether she regarded both with equal favour, or had no particular regard for either, not the wisest gossip in Shotwick could venture to decide. Phœbe liked flattery, and had had more than her share while at Mrs. Hopley's, and that too from beaus and dandies rejoicing in noble titles ; for the dressmaker, though in her own person plain to primness, worked for the noted Lady Grosvenor, and for those lords and ladies who visited Eaton Hall during the races, elections, or other busy times ; for lords had ruffles and frills to be hemmed or tamboured, and vests to be embroidered : and, many a lace-ruffled, periwigged coxcomb, had presumed to put his jewelled fingers under the dimpled chin of the blushing seamstress in the show-room, and vow she was " vastly pretty, demme."

But Mrs. Hopley was too strict a disciplinarian to permit such advances unchecked. And, any attempt

at familiarity with one of the damsels in her employ, invariably resulted in the instant dismissal of the girl to the work-room, while she gave intimation to the gentleman, whatever his rank, that she "permitted no freedoms of that kind in her house" (*establishments* are modern inventions.) Mrs. Hopley's prudential precautions, however, though they might serve to keep her apprentices out of the reach of lawless libertinism, could not prevent these little items of flattery swelling up a long bill in the ledger of vanity, and so little Miss Horne, in feeble imitation of the aristocratic belles who languished or flirted in her presence at Mrs. Hopley's, alternately smiled or frowned, froze or thawed, until both her rustic admirers were driven almost to desperation.

In different men, the same causes work different effects; thus, that which drew Matthew Spark from the smithy to the Black Bear drove Miles Wood from the inn, and kept him in his own work-shed. Leaving the fire in his forge to die out, and his irons to cool, Matthew, drawn by the irresistibly attractive glances of Phœbe's eyes, hovered about the inn, adding, with every glimpse of his enslaver, fresh fuel to his flaming heart, which not all the ale he so freely imbibed had power to extinguish. Not so the wheelwright. Miles had some common sense under the rough crust of his external man; and, he argued, that if Phœbe smiled upon him, it was because of her

own kindness and good nature, not on account of his deserts, nor of any liking for him—for was she not pretty, and book-learned, and mannered, and well-spoken like a lady? and had she not a business in her fingers that would keep her amongst ladies, even before her father found money to “set her up for herself in Chester?” And was she not pretty enough to marry a squire? if so be, she had a mind, to say nothing of Ralph’s money-bags, which alone might make her look higher than an ignorant, country wheelwright. Ignorant! ah, there was the rub. She was sure to despise a chap who could hardly spell his name or read his catechism, and could neither write nor cipher, however good-looking he might be, or however good a hand at his trade. And, as he became conscious that every time he saw her, he became more hopelessly entangled, and that she smiled alike on himself and his brawny rival, he resolved to distance his competitor after a new fashion, and was secretly gaining ground in the race, whilst to outer seeming he almost abandoned the course to Matthew. But this feeling with which he was thoroughly imbued, that the pretty and educated Phœbe must despise two ignorant country lads like himself and Mat Spark, left no room for jealousy. And, every time he saw the smith come home from the Black Bear, he felt less tendency to be jealous, and only said to himself, that Mat was drowning every

spark of a chance with Phœbe. Whether he was right or wrong has yet to be seen.

Actuated by the same desire to win the love of fascinating Phœbe, yet these two young men pursued widely different paths. Matthew followed her perseveringly like her shadow, would do her bidding like a lap-dog, drinking and neglecting his business solely because he thought the way to Phœbe was through her father's open door; and once within the magic circle of her smiles, he was powerless to stir.

Miles—loving her no less, respecting himself more—kept to his business perseveringly, was frequent in his evening attendance on the clerk and curate, and after a time began to make periodical trips to Chester, generally starting at three o'clock on Monday afternoon, and returning late in the evening. As a matter of course he was seen less frequently on the long settle at the Black Bear, and his meetings with Phœbe under her father's roof became fewer. But, as if to compensate for the loss of glances dimly discernible through the reek of tobacco-smoke, as he passed through the churchyard on his way to the curate's house, he not seldom had the luck (good or ill) to meet Phœbe returning from Madame Latham's, and if she happened to be in a gracious mood, she might perchance permit him to relieve her of a basket or parcel, and walk by her side to her own door, according her permission with an air of condescension

and affectation of dignity, which sat very prettily upon the spoiled little beauty, but would have been arrant absurdity in a common-place country girl. But Phœbe did not esteem herself a country girl ; half her airs were traceable to the semi-fashionable city, and the very fashionable people with whom she had come, humbly enough, into contact ; and when she treated her rustic lovers with scorn, or stooped to accept their attentions from the lofty height of her self-conceit, she only aped her betters. The little wayward coquette really felt herself superior to her unlettered admirers in education as in everything else ; so Miles was not far wrong in his conjectures, and the girl had a little more reason to keep her swains at a distance than may at first sight appear.

Education, however, will neither give cool heads nor warm hearts, nor common sense, nor will it outweigh these more valuable attributes, however it may increase their value. Matthew's heart was warm and true, but he lacked discretion to guide it ; and so Phœbe played the tyranness over him ; but the cool head and common sense of Miles came to the rescue of his soft and susceptible heart, just in time to keep him from making the fool of himself his less discreet rival seemed so proud to become.

The wheelwright's cottage and work-shed were situated at the extremity of the village, and the smithy stood close beside it, as though for the mutual

convenience of the handicraftsmen, and their employers. The cottage of Miles Wood sheltered, besides himself, his widowed mother, and a sister about eighteen, a blooming country girl, very closely resembling her brother, but in no ways striking either in face or figure. He had always been commended for his conduct towards these two; he invariably supported the steps of his mother when on Sundays she tottered, rather than walked, to her seat in the old church, and not even the captivating glances of Phœbe could call him from his filial task, until he had safely deposited her in the arm-chair by the cottage door, or in winter by the fireside. Then he maintained his sister and mother entirely by his own labour, the former repaying him with true-hearted affection, and care for his domestic comfort; for not a house in all Shotwick had cleaner windows and floors, whiter platters, or brighter oak-chairs and tables: and if the brother's home-spun shirts were coarse, they were as white as good washing could make them. His mother was too feeble for active exertion, but she sat and knitted coarse grey stockings for her son, and their neighbours, or spun the flax for their household linen.

This was the state of their household about the time when Michael Ford came into possession of the Grange, and somewhere about the same time commenced the weekly visits of Miles to Chester; then

Miles hired a horse from Ralph Horne, and mounting his sister Jane on a pillion behind him, with her few belongings in a bundle before him, trotted off down the Shotwick lane, and took the road to Chester, to the astonishment of the slow-to-move population, and the bewilderment of the gossips, to whom he had not thought proper to impart his business on that occasion, any more than the motive which took him every Monday in the same direction. Good-natured neighbours were kind enough to say that he was tired of keeping his sister, and had taken her to service in Chester to make way for a wife he was about to bring home ; but, as usual, rumour lied vilely. His own business was not the charitably-imagined one of courtship, nor did he take his sister away to get rid of her. True to himself and his well-grounded belief, he had been steadily endeavouring to overcome the deficiency of education ; from the clerk and clergyman he had received instruction, but the former had not been overtaught himself, and the curate could not spare all the time Miles was anxious to employ, so once a week he sought a skilful master, and under his care battled with the difficulties in the path of knowledge, now kicked aside easily by children of nine or ten. Having thought learning necessary to fit him to aspire to Phœbe, he felt it as necessary for Jane to be fitted to be their companion on equal terms, and not only that, but seeing the independence

a trade imparted to the innkeeper's daughter, he resolved she should have one too, and when he trotted to Chester with his blooming sister behind him, he was conveying her to a new home in a respectable family, where she would learn the new and brisk trade of straw hat and bonnet making, and besides, have leisure to attend an evening school.

These plans could not be carried out without money; but Miles had been frugal; the trade his father left him had steadily increased; and at this time he had about thirty guineas laid by against a rainy day; so that he could well afford to pay a small fee with Jane, as well as for her schooling, and also to engage a young woman to supply in a measure his sister's place at home.

With a simple-minded purpose, that of rendering himself what he considered worthy of the rare object of his rarer attachment, it never occurred to him that the change in his habits would produce any immediate effect upon Phœbe; but he estimated her beyond her real value, and regarded as pardonable pride that which was sheer coquetry and love of admiration. Not but what there were some good properties deep down in her woman's heart, but so many straws swam on the surface, one could not see the bright pebbles gleaming below.

The alacrity with which Miles Wood had responded

to her wish, and carried the basket of provisions to the haunted Grange when Mr. Ford and Mr. Peover went to make their survey, had completely reinstated the young man in her favour (not the less readily perhaps because she was pleased to construe Matthew Spark's reluctant "could not," into "would not"); and so, after service on the following Sunday morning, she tripped home from church by the side of old dame Wood and her son; and furthermore, vouchsafed the information that she was "expected at the lodge that afternoon, and didn't mean Matthew Spark to take her there, though she supposed he would be ready enough to thrust himself where he was not wanted." And when Miles, acting on the hint, asked if she had any objection to his company on the road, the scornful toss of the head which pointed her renunciation of Matthew Spark's companionship was not repeated; but a sidelong glance and faint simper accompanied the words, drawled out very slowly, "No, not any that I know of just at present; you can come if you have nothing better to do."

Anything better to do! Ah, the sly young gipsy knew he had "nothing better to do," but would be sure to meet her before she reached the churchyard gate; and so, conscious of her own importance in having one beau to play off against another, she would not condescend even to turn her head in the direction of the smithy as she passed it, though she

had seen the owner leaning expectantly against the closed shutter. Nor when he followed her down the village to her father's door, and asked her very humbly "What han oi dun amiss, Miss Phœbe, as yo' wunna oven, look at un : yo' knew oi'd go th' warld's end to please yo'!"

"Those who are not willing to come when they are wanted, had better keep back when they are not wanted, Mr. Spark!" and another contemptuous toss of the pretty head followed her reply, as she entered the house and left him standing by the step, too stupidly abashed to answer until she was out of hearing.

"But oi could na leave th' horse half shod ; oi wish tho' oi had'n now," added he, dejectedly, to himself, as with a sigh he too entered the house, and called for "a mug o' yale," with the double purpose of washing out his repulse, and watching for an opportunity to win Phœbe over to kindness.

Quite a mistake on Matthew's part, quite. From behind the curtain of a little one-paned window, serving as a post of observation from the bar-parlour into the general room, Phœbe watched the disconsolate looks of the rebuffed swain with the rejoicing of a successful general after a victory, but without one atom of compassion for the wounded. Had Matthew broken a leg, or an arm, or even a finger, Phœbe would have been truly sorry, and ready to sympathize with

the sufferer, or nurse him to health, but if he only broke his heart, that would not matter much! It would only be a greater tribute to the power of her charms! Perhaps it would be only charitable to suppose the damsel had never thought seriously <sup>about</sup> consequences, when she strove to captivate all the young men within reach of her smiles, more especially the two village artizans, with whom she played her game of "fast and loose" so very pleasantly. She might never have read the fable of the "Boys and Frogs," or if she had, might not have thought that sweet smiles, and tones, and glances, might be as dangerous missiles aimed at tender hearts, as the stones with which the playful boys belaboured the soft backs of the poor frogs. Perhaps after all she only wanted thought; but in cases of this nature that is a very serious want indeed.

With his mug of ale before him, Matthew waited in the vain hope of speech with Phœbe, though his dinner was also waiting and spoiling at home, whither he had better have gone, since he only waited for an additional heartache; for if Miles was not jealous, he was; and as he watched the scarlet cloak, the dress of changeable silk, and the broad-brimmed black silk hat from the door, thinking the wearer as changeable as her dress; when he saw her meet his rival merrily, and trip away with her hand on his arm along the path she had trod the previous Sunday with himself, he went back to

the long settle and his ale, and sat there dinnerless, moody, and sullen the rest of the day.

Very pleasant to Miles was that afternoon stroll. The bright eyes and rosy cheeks were inexpressibly bewitching. Seldom had Phœbe striven to make herself so agreeable ; but the fact is, she had been somewhat piqued by the continued absence of Miles from the house she called her home, and was interested to learn what could possibly be the object which so occupied his time that he had none to spare for love-making. The readiness with which he obeyed her sovereign behests, and at her bidding shouldered a basket for Mr. Ford, in defiance of the ghost, inclined her to the belief that his sequestration arose from causes independent of herself ; and as some little mystery had attached to his late movements, female curiosity impelled her to an effort to penetrate his secret. Besides, it must be admitted that if she had an undiscovered leaning to either of her lovers it was in favour of Miles. The hard study (of which she knew nothing) pursued late at night, when all around were abed, supplementing the manual labour of the day, had stolen some of the colour from his cheeks, though he was still healthy and robust, as such a worker need be. Then he had grown a shade more thoughtful and retiring, whilst Matthew, on the contrary, only grew redder in the face, more burly in figure, more noisy, and more assiduous ; and, as

Phœbe was just the one to advance towards a retreating lover, and retire from a pursuing one, the clue to her conduct is easily followed.

Without knowing anything of Mahomet or his doctrines, Miles was in the seventh heaven of delight that blissful Sunday afternoon, at the gracious manner of the pretty plague whom he certainly loved with his whole heart; and was only restrained from telling her so, by the dread of a repulse on account of his ignorance, and by the common sense which bade him wait till he had a better vantage ground.

Madame Latham, albeit unaware of his higher aims and aspirations, regarded him with somewhat more complacency than she accorded to the blacksmith, for looking upon the latter as a tippler, and having no such charge to lay at the young wheelwright's door, she came to look upon him as something less objectionable than the other, not altogether suited as a mate for her winsome favourite, but the better, far the better of the twain. Observing him from a staircase window cooling his heels in the kitchen garden, through which lay the path to the servants' door, the old lady sent a messenger to him; and on his entrance into the servants' hall, after some kindly inquiries about his aged mother and his sister, desired that in future whenever Phœbe chose to permit his attendance thither, he would enter the house, and there wait her time to return. Phœbe, she said, had

no right to accept the escort of any man she was ashamed to be seen with ; nor had any well-meaning, straightforward man either right or reason to skulk outside her son's door as though ashamed to show his face within it. But to Phœbe in her own parlour she spoke a little more plainly, and endeavoured to elicit from the capricious young maiden her intentions with respect to the young men she kept dangling after her, apparently with no other motive than the gratification of her own love of admiration ; and she read her a sharp homily on the folly and selfishness of her conduct.

This was by no means the first time she had favoured Phœbe with an extempore sermon on the right of mankind to consideration at the hands of the young and pretty of her own sex ; and the duty of every woman so to act that the deeds of her youth should never cause a blush in maturity or age, to act from principle not self-will or caprice ; and to regard the feelings of others as sacred as her own. But it was the first time she put the point-blank question to her.

“ Phœbe, do you love either of these young men well enough to become his wife ? Stop ! ” continued she, arresting the girl’s stammering speech. “ Stop, I do not mean, do you love well enough to go to church, and be made much of at a wedding feast, and be called by his name ; but well enough to become the constant companion of his home, the partner of his

cares and anxieties, as well as his joys, well enough to settle down as a sober housewife by his cottage fireside, and remain there cheerful and faithful from youth to age? If you do not, and I scarcely think you do, you are doing a very wicked thing in misleading him to think so."

Playing with the string of her hat, and twiddling the ribbons over her fingers, Phœbe essayed to reply, and in a tone that was neither a pout nor a whimper, but akin to both, stammered out—

"I'm not going to be married, madam."

"I did not ask if you were going to be married; but if you felt inclined and fit to become the wife of one of these country mechanics," was the lady's quick retort, with more severity of manner than was usual with her.

"I am sure, madam, I've not thought about being married, I'm sure I have not," was the whimpering response.

"Then it is quite time you did, and thought seriously about it too, for if I am not much mistaken both these rustic sweethearts of yours, Phœbe, have thought of marriage for some time, and whichever you refuse will feel the disappointment keenly.

"I am sure, Madame Latham, I cannot help Matthew Spark running after me. I've told him, many and many a time, I did not want him after me, and I cared nothing about him; but he will follow

me wherever I go. I can't help it if he will be so silly."

"Not help it, child? Did I not see you go home last Sunday, looking up into his face as if you loved him; and to-day, after the lapse of only a week, you come on another sweetheart's arm, with glances just as alluring, and, I suppose, as false. Phœbe, I am ashamed of you! Your mother was a decorous, prudent woman; and, if she had lived, her example might have taught you at least modesty and self-respect. As it is, poor child, you have been left too much to your own guidance, and so I must not be over harsh with you, I suppose. Still, I must say, Phœbe, my dear, that it is not proper for a young girl to be constantly taking solitary rambles with a young man who is not her acknowledged sweetheart, whom she is pledged to marry; and, as you cannot marry both, one at least of these men has no right to be the companion of your walks."

Phœbe hung her head, and wiped her eyes, for the spoiled child was not accustomed to reproof, and sobbed out:

"I am sure I meant no harm!"

"You might mean no harm; but, my girl, there is harm in all impropriety, and, I beg that, from this time forth, you will act as beseems your dead mother's daughter. Think seriously, and at once discard or decline the attentions of whichever of these

young men you are averse to, or *both*, if you cannot resign yourself to be the dutiful and attached wife of an utterly uneducated man. Young girls want judgment and reflection, and so I will give you my impression as a guide for your own careful consideration. Matthew Spark is, I fear, too constant a frequenter of your father's house to make a sober or good husband. Miles Wood is a good son, and a good brother : steady, frugal, and industrious, and though not educated, even as you are, you might go farther and fare worse. I say this to direct your choice, if it has yet to be made ; but unless you love one, I beg you will at once cease to encourage either ! Be here on Tuesday, Phœbe, I require some neckerchiefs hemmed, and a calesh making, and other things, so tell your father you will remain the week. Now, go to the housekeeper's room, and tell Mrs. Emery to invite Miles Wood to tea with you, and go home at once after tea, and, remember—let there be no more trifling!"

"Phœbe curtsied demurely, and retired ; not *very* much bettered by the advice of her patroness, but rather inclined to revolt against the dictation. Accustomed to consult only her own sweet will, and to regard herself infallible, the reproof was somewhat unsavoury ; still, it had one good effect, it set her thinking ; and thought, persistent thought, comes near to truth in the long run. However, she walked home with Miles a very little more thoughtfully, but

still bent on discovering how he occupied his evenings, and failing to obtain a direct reply to round-about questions, by the time she reached the Black Bear her equanimity was quite upset, and she took leave of Miles as pettishly as a thwarted child.

If she rejoiced in the morning, she was sufficiently annoyed now: Madame Latham had taken her to task; she had not learned what Miles did in his leisure hours, and he had not said he was in love with her, though she had given him many opportunities; and so she was provoked and displeased with herself, and Miles, and Madame Latham, and everything, and everybody, and cried herself to sleep like the baby she was.

As the days went by, and Miles continued his Monday trips to Chester; vague rumours reached her ears that he was courting a young lass in the city, and she became more than ever annoyed to think she had looked favourably on one who did not care for her—but what did it matter?—she did not care for him either; it was nothing to her whom he courted, or where he went; there were better sweethearts than he to be found anywhere; she cared nothing about him—not she! And the more she strove to convince herself that she did not care for Miles Wood, the more she found herself wondering if it was all true; if he really was courting some one else; and what he meant by squeezing her hand so hard as they came out of church, if he was

courting any one besides herself? and why he looked so reproachfully when she snubbed him, and took up with Matthew out of spite? Ah, Phœbe! that was an admission to yourself; but spite is a will-o'-the-wisp, and apt to lead into sad quagmires!

In the midst of her bewilderment with Miles and Matthew, she was called to the Grange to wait upon Alice Ford, and in the excitement of meeting an old schoolfellow, in the person of one of the new tenants of the Grange, she for a time forgot her little perplexities, and became a rational being. It must be told that she regarded Alice as a heroine endowed with more than mortal courage; to contemplate serenely the prospect of dwelling in a place hitherto supposed to be doomed to perpetual desolation; and many were the conversations she held with her on the subject of apparitions, the starting-point being invariably the ghost of the Grange, the incredulity of Alice battling vigorously with the timidity and credulity of Phœbe.

The little mind of Phœbe was not capable of holding more than one marvel at a time; but as the newness of Alice Ford's arrival died away, and her heroism became familiar, an inkling of the warm relation existing between George Latham and the young lady dawned upon her; and as an insinuated mark of sympathy in her friend's concealed love affairs, she bestowed upon Alice, unsought, her confidence; re-

lated how she was pestered by Matthew Spark, and had been followed by Miles Wood, and lectured by Madame Latham, and how she "didn't know what to make of Miles, latterly;" and how she was puzzled which to have, for though she thought she liked Miles the best, he had never given her the chance of saying "No;" and though she had told Matthew to "go about his business," many a time, he wouldn't, she said, but made it his great business to follow her; and thereupon she asked the opinion of Alice what she should do.

To the great surprise of Phœbe, who opined that all young girls in love must think and feel alike, Alice, even on the little flirt's own showing, condemned her as a coquette, and told her that no woman was worthy of an honest man's love who could trifle with the feelings of him or any other man; and begged her, as she regarded her own happiness, to think well which of these she esteemed most, and if she loved him, and was assured he loved her, to keep true and constant to him only, whatever might betide.

This was not exactly what Phœbe expected, and she looked rather rueful at receiving a second sermon where she hoped for support in her own wayward fancies; and, contenting herself with the belief that neither Alice nor Madame Latham could comprehend her peculiar position or perplexities, resolved to drift with the tide, and please herself.

But, pleasing ourselves is by no means so easy a task as some people imagine; we cannot regulate or control the actions of others, but those actions may interfere very considerably with our intention of pleasing ourselves, and so Phœbe found, to her infinite annoyance.

She remained at the Lodge after Alice had gone to her new home, still hearing rumours of the trips of Miles to Chester, on courtship bent, but these reached their climax the day when Matthew escorted Miss Ford to the Lodge, charged with the message that "Whistler had bolted." Whistler was the horse hired by Miles to convey his sister to Chester, and the "bolting" occurred on the road home, but that was little to the purpose. The journey and its probable object concerned Phœbe, not the freaks of a scared horse, and Matthew was sure not to denude the rumour of any disagreeable garment it might wear.

So Phœbe felt herself slighted and aggrieved, and pouted, and vowed she would please herself and spite *him*, and be revenged, that she would. And, in order to be revenged, she was amiable once more to Matthew, and sent him away delighted, and then went to her room for a "good cry."

## CHAPTER XIV.

## THE THRESHOLD OF CHRISTMAS.

THE inhabitants of God's Providence House had begun to regard the threatening letter received in November, more as an idle attempt to alarm Mr. Peover, than part of a serious design to prevent the fulfilment of his contract, since nothing occurred to disturb the even tenor of their lives, although the Grange had not only been completed but inhabited a fortnight, and Christmas had yet to come.

But the good old man's fancied security was broken in upon by a second letter, given to Margery in the street by a boy, who darted down an alley, and was out of sight in an instant. It was in the same hand, though rather less laconic than the former :

“ OLD MAN,—You have despised my warning. But, heed this, DEATH lies in wait for you or yours at the Grange, or for yourself in the very streets for three weeks’ space. Security is only at home—keep there.

Put a foot within the gates of the Grange, and you die like a dog. Keep silence, too, if you would keep your life.

“YOU KNOW ME.”

This time Mr. Peover's hand did not palsy, the threat was no longer vague but defined, and the conditions involved no breach of trust. He, however, as usual, took counsel with Martha on the subject, and her opinion this time followed his. But she remarked what he had passed over; the threat in connection with the former letter, still kept suspended like the sword of Dionysus over the head of Damocles, and she counselled a plan to nullify it. “Have you any business requiring your immediate presence at the Grange?” was her first question, and he replied, “No, no; but I met Mr. Ford at the Blue Posts yesterday, and he invited us to spend Christmas Day with them: he expects that young man from Manchester who did him such good service in Delamere Forest, and I half promised we would go—promised we would go.”

On Christmas Day we cannot; will not our Reverend Brother Fletcher from Madely sojourn here, we must not neglect the servants of the Lord for our temporal friends; nor must we leave the special services of Christian worship for the feasting and junketing there will be at the

Grange. We have a higher calling. Besides, there will be our Christmas alms to dispense, and, though Margery would regard the trust as sacred, and perform it duly, a kind look or the ‘word in season’ from ourselves, will add a grace to the charity and enhance the value of our gifts. No, Joseph, I think our place on Christmas Day is at home, irrespective of this threat of Ned’s, and if you agree with me, I will write a line to say so.”

“ Yes, if you will, Martha, I am a clumsy hand at an excuse—a clumsy hand at an excuse. I had forgot all about the preacher from Madely—that’s a truth, that’s a truth.”

“ Well, then, Christmas will be spent at home, and if you have no necessity calling you to Shotwick, there is no reason why you should wilfully run yourself into possible danger. This letter may be but an empty threat, but it may have a serious import, and wisdom suggests to my mind discretion. What do you think, Joseph ?”

Same as you—same as you. But I can’t remain a prisoner at home three weeks for that rascal’s whims ; must mind my business ; must mind my business. What with drink and Christmas-boxing, the men will be all at a loose end, and will need looking after ; need looking after ?”

“ Look after them, then, attend to such business in the city as needs your presence, without fear ; so long

as you are doing your simple duty, the Lord will protect his own, and you need dread neither ‘the arrow that flieth by night, nor the pestilence that walketh at noon-day.’ All I would advise is, that you should not needlessly run counter to the warning of a ruthless and desperate foe.”

“Just so—just so!”

“But Joseph, do you not feel it desirable to render void such threats as the one repeated at the head of his letter?”

“Should think I did; should think I did! But how—how?”

“Take Mr. Ford into your confidence fully; relate to him all you revealed to me last November, and the right arm of the mischief is paralysed. Nay, more, take him into your counsels, as you did your old friend Latham; he is a sensible and practical man; and if any one can relieve your mind of that great perplexity, I feel that he can. You want a friend, make one of him; he will be a staunch one, and in the latter case unbiassed.”

“I must think about it; I must think about it, Martha,” and the dew stood on his brow, “You counsel well—well. If my nerves only equalled yours! But I will think it over; think it over;” and he dropped his head on his hands, and so remained for some time, in deep and perplexed thought, undisturbed by the entrance of Margery, who came to lay

the dinner-cloth, or by the rattle of knives and forks, the jingle of glasses, the clatter of plates, or any of the noises inseparable from Margery's task, no matter how grave and orderly the manipulator might be.

But that day passed into night ; and another day dawned, and another ; and yet many another, before the old man determined what course to adopt. He acknowledged the wisdom of his good wife's advice, but his constitutional timidity would not suffer him to profit by it. At length, however, after the lapse of many days, he came to the conclusion that it would be best to take Mr. Ford into his entire confidence ; but even then he deferred the confession it involved to "some day soon :" and although Martha urged the desirability of doing promptly that he had resolved so well to do, December shook hands with January, and January whistled to weeping February, yet Mr. Ford had neither been confided in nor consulted.

But if the writer of the mysterious epistles had no other motive than to keep Mr. Peover at home for three or four weeks, he might have spared ink and paper, for a more powerful agent than his threats laid an embargo on the builder, and confined him to his arm-chair. He had not returned home from Shotwick on the Thursday, after concluding his business with Mr. Ford, but remained with his wife, as Mrs. Latham's guest, until Friday morning, and then though the sky was lowering, was compelled to depart

by the calls of pressing business. Before they had gone more than a mile of the road the rain came down heavily, and as they travelled in an open gig, they were drenched to the skin long before they reached Chester, notwithstanding their heavy wrappings. Margery, sorry to see the plight in which they were, stirred up the fire, and bustled about to remove the dripping hood and cloaks, find an entire change of raiment, and then prepare hot elder wine as a preservative against cold; but neither dry clothes, nor elder wine, nor Margery's care, could preserve Mr. Peover from a severe attack of rheumatism, which lasted all the winter, and effectually prevented him from stirring abroad. Mrs. Peover escaped with a heavy cold; but except to chapel, where she went in all weathers, whether well or ill, she never left her husband's side to go anywhere.

At the Grange preparations were making for the coming of Christmas and the Christmas guest. After the first storm which burst over Alice on the admission that she had been to the Lodge (for she could not stoop to a denial), Michael relaxed his sternness and severity on observing that she made no further attempts to quit the house, and as on the Sabbaths the intercourse of the lovers was restricted to a word or two of casual greeting, which he knew not how to prevent, he became less stern, and something of his old kindliness came back to his words and tones. The

Lyons silk was measured, and fitted and made, after the newest mode, Phœbe working at the Grange, but coming in a morning and returning early in an evening until it was completed, and as she was too timid to cross the dreaded grounds after dusk, and was also too timid to remain, Matthew was half-invited to be her protector on her way home, and the indirect invitation serving as effectually as a perfect one, she had the pleasure each evening of tantalizing Miles with the sight of their apparent felicity as they passed his open shed.

George Latham had taken Phœbe into his confidence as far as he considered necessary, and she was not a little proud of the trust. She loved a secret dearly, and a love-secret above all, and was sure not to betray her friends. With a father who seemed careless whether she herself married anybody or nobody, and who looked on with equal indifference whether she flirted with the smith or the wheelwright, she felt the case of Alice to be one of peculiar hardship, and was prepared to regard Mr. Ford as a sort of domestic ogre. George had impressed her with the necessity there was to make herself so agreeable and useful that her presence might be desirable even if no actual business services were required, and she performed this portion of her duty admirably, inasmuch as it required no effort, the chief study of her life having been to please or fascinate all with whom she came in contact.

She worked in Alice's little sitting-room, and there, unnoticed by her mother, who came in and out but seldom, Alice penned brief answers to George's daily communications, equally unsuspected by her father, who seeing her about the house busy as of old, and with something of her old cheerfulness returning, attributed it in a measure to the presence of a light-hearted, merry female companion of her own age; and thinking he might have made a mistake in isolating Alice from other girls hitherto, expressed a desire that Phœbe should be made welcome whenever she chose to come, whether for work or play; and himself gave her a general invitation, saying, it was a pleasure to have such a blythe, bright-eyed lass about the old rooms. So George's scheme flourished, as far as his messenger was concerned.

Phœbe was therefore detained long after the dress was completed, and assisted Alice to prepare a chamber for the visitor she so little desired to see. It was a large apartment, adjoining Mr. Ford's, and there was a door of communication between the two, but the entrance was from the corridor. It was lit by two windows; one near the corner, overlooking the large courtyard; the other opposite to the principal door, embracing a prospect of farm-buildings and labourers' cottages, and pasture-lands bounded by the bright waters of the silvery Dee, there about two miles broad. The opposite wing differed from this,

as there the corresponding room had been partitioned into two small ones, and the entrance was not from the corridor but the kitchen staircase ; just as Mr. Ford's room had no direct communication with the corridor, its door opening on a square landing to a side staircase, although its inmates could pass to the main corridor through either Alice's apartment or the one provided for Mr. Heywood.

The guest-chamber furniture from Ford-brook had been deposited here—the downy beds, the spindly bedsteads, the patchwork-bottomed chairs, Rob Roy carpeting, and all that went to make that room so comfortable ; but the shepherd and shepherdesses had been transferred to the next room, and to honour the guest who had first to occupy it, dimity had been procured from Chester, and the fingers of Alice and Phœbe were busied for three or four days in draping bed and windows ; not lightly, so as to furnish the room, yet admit all the air and light possible, but with voluminous folds and festoons, calculated to exclude both, and to answer no purpose save the use of an extravagant quantity of material, and as extravagant a waste of labour. Places were found for Hogarth's prints, and bits of evergreen were stuck above the Idle Apprentice and the Rake's Progress ; a sprig of red-berried holly was placed with some quaking-grass and everlasting in the Derbyshire-spar vase on the bureau, the swing-glass had a drapery of

muslin, and the spindle-legged toilet table a modest petticoat of dimity, but there was no "Welcome" now knitted into the cover of the pretty pincushion Alice laid upon the table. Mrs. Ford marked the omission when she came to examine the general appearance of the chamber, and asked why it was not there as usual to greet a visitor, but Alice's brief and decisive reply, "I have no welcome for Mr. Heywood, mother, and I prepare the room, but I cannot imply an untruth," silenced any remonstrance she might have made, and with a little sigh, indicative of her powerlessness to contend, she returned to her kitchen and cookery.

Closing the door on the dimity and the scent of lavender and clean linen, the two girls descended to the long room, and then came Dick and Ben luggering in great heaps of holly and mistletoe, and fir and laurel, and Dick cut the great branches into small ones, and because, he said, the holly would scratch the soft arms and fingers of the dainty misses, he called Peggy from the kitchen to help in the construction of wreaths to festoon the walls; and as garland after garland issued from their hard hands, Alice, mounted on a ladder, arranged them on the walls, while little Phœbe stuck odd sprigs of the red-berried evergreen in every available spot; a tiny bit of mistletoe she placed over the embroidered counterpart of Alice, telling her the while, in discreet confidence, that Mr.

Heywood might kiss the picture if he liked, it would neither say "nay" nor box his ears, and if she were Alice she would do both. The sampler, and the oil-painting portraits of Sir Luke and Mr. and Mrs. Ford came under her care, and the great bay windows, and she performed her office with much taste. While Dick and Peggy, with oftener interlaced fingers than the occasion called for, prepared a huge "kissing bush," as they denominated the mistletoe bough, and decorated the same with golden oranges and rosy apples, Dick, through some strange association of opposites in his mind, blurted out, "Miss Alice, dun yo knaw measter han sent back them tarriers to Mester Latham? Oi decleer oi never wur so sheam-faced i' moi loife, as oi wur i' takin them back!"

"No, I was not aware of it, Dick; when were they sent?"

"This mearn, first thing, measter said as how he'd ha' nought o' a Latham's nigh th' Grange; but it fair went agen moi hert to tak' them tarriers back, they have killed a soight o' rats, an' th' barns fair swarm wi' th' varmint."

"Well, Dick, perhaps my father thought these dogs only lent to us; and fancies our own ought to be able to clear the premises of the intruders."

"Happen, he may, but oi dunno think it, miss; whoi Peggy what beest thee shaking thy head abawt, and lookin' so fleered loike?" asked Dick, turning to his assistant.

"Oive heerd it's summat more than rots as keeps us a' awake i' the neeght," responded Peggy, shaking her head again very mysteriously.

"Whoi whatn's the wench droivin' at?" asked Dick, with wondering stare.

"Whoi, Mester Spark says as how a ghost walks i' th' Grange, an' it is na rots that skreek and run!" answered Peggy, in a confidential whisper, and a very conclusive nod of her wise head.

"Ha, ha, ha! ha, ha, ha!" roared Dick, "Whoi, wench, thee'st getting waur ev'ry day; did'n anny body hear o' th' ghost on a rot afore?"

"Oi didna say 'twur th' ghost on a rot. It's th' ghost o' a woman wi' a long grey gown, an' it flits thro' th' rooms skreeking a' the toime!"

"Dunna thee be such a mortal fuile, wench. An' oi cotch Mester Spark or any other spark makking thee more suppositious than thee bee'st, oi'll gie un a taste o' that!" answered Dick, with a ludicrously half-savage grin, displaying his huge clenched fist as a specimen of what Matthew might expect.

Alice and Phœbe had said nothing during this colloquy, but the latter shivered and looked around as if there were a ghost ready to pounce amongst them even in the daylight; and Alice mentally congratulated her father on so sensible an ally as Dick evinced himself. When he had concluded his belligerent display, however, she took occasion to com-

pliment him on his good sense as shown in his disbelief in ghosts ; and her few words of commendation served to confirm him in his unbelief, and inclined to do battle with any man who ventured to be credulous.

From the long parlour the ready made garlands and trimmed sprigs of evergreens, were carried to adorn the drawing-room, but Alice suspended no mistletoe-bough there, in the face of Joseph and Potiphar's wife. Joseph never countenanced kissing other men's wives, and betrothal was sacred as marriage. Then Alice's little room, and her father's, had to be trimmed, and the hall to be made a perfect bower, and the massive oak balustrades wreathed, until the Grange was almost as green and leafy within as without.

Meanwhile, the bright kitchen glowed with an enormous fire, and though it was December, and the ground white with a fleece of snow, the door stood open to let out the heat, and in or out the bustling men or women, who, with Christmas importance on their faces, helped to prepare the Christmas cheer. In the outbuildings men were plucking geese, turkeys, chickens, pigeons and partridges, skinning hares and rabbits, or cutting up the fat porker killed the day before. In the kitchen Margaret was busy superintending preparations for cakes and jellies, mince pies, tartlets, game, pork, giblet and chicken pies,

potted meats, sausages, and an infinite variety of nameless et ceteras. Ben pounded sugar or whisked eggs, or chopped sausage-meat or currants, or went to the pump for water, or carried away refuse; whilst Betty and Sally, the new maid, pared and chopped apples, and beef and suet, and raisins and currants, and candied peel, till the place was perfumed like a pastry-cook's, and noisy with the dull clatter of knives on the white wooden chopping board and bowls, There was sweetening, and seasoning, and spicing, boiling and baking, jugging and roasting, mixing of sausage forcemeat and mincemeat, making of trifles and custards, and flummery, currant loaves and sweet cakes of many descriptions, stuffing of geese and turkeys, trussing of fowls and game, and lastly, the compounding of more than one huge plum-pudding, a task which devolved on Alice when the embowering process was completed, and Phœbe had gone back to Shotwick attended by her faithful esquire. By mid-day on the twenty-fourth, the bustle in the kitchen began to subside, and as Peggy resumed her sway in the usurped domain, the scattered culinary utensils were scoured or polished and replaced, an extra polish was given to plate and pewter, evergreens hung and clustered about, table-cloths, and glass and china reserved for special occasions were brought from the lavendered linen press, and crowded china closet. The buffet in the long room was enriched with family

relics in the shape of silver salvers, punch bowls, race cups, coursing cups and hunting cups, which told that neither Sir Luke Grenville, nor Michael Ford's ancestors had surrendered themselves to farming as a pursuit, whatever their worthy successor might do ; and as Michael glanced over these testimonies to the exploits of his kindred, and surveyed the general preparations from that room upwards to Mr. Heywood's, his voice echoed the well-satisfied expression of his face.

On the Monday he had burdened Miles with a hamper for Mr. Peover, of fruit gathered at Fordbrook, and poultry killed at the Grange. He had distributed over Shotwick sundry tokens of geniality and benevolence in the guise of Christmas-boxes, and to the cottages of his hinds geese and pork, apples and potatoes, cheese and white bread, ready-made plum puddings, and home-brewed ale in large stone bottles had been sent, in order that each family might make a festival of Christmas on its own hearth, under its own roof, and be knit closer together by the bond.

In efforts like these to promote the comfort and happiness of his dependents, and act as a faithful steward of the abundance he possessed, he had spent the morning ; and, as if in confirmation of the truism, "it is more blessed to give than to receive," his face beamed with intense satisfaction ; and, as Alice met

him in the hall dressed for the afternoon, the light of Christmas on her countenance, he interpreted the smile into a desire to please him, and receive his guest willingly as her own. Of the letters of Christmas salutation she had just penned for Phœbe to carry to Mrs. Latham and her son, or of the warm words of love then lying on her heart, to sustain and comfort her, and give her strength to endure even the presence of the coming suitor, he knew nothing, and suspected nothing, or his pleasure had not been so unequivocally expressed.

It was Christmas-eve, Peggy had brought forth from some secret depository a large piece of charred wood, which she triumphantly held aloft above her head as an invaluable prize. It was a portion of the former year's yule-log, preserved to kindle the two great logs. Dick and Ben had carried in with much ceremony; and, carefully dividing her treasure into two portions, she marched with one to the drawing-room, followed by Dick bearing the smaller yule-log, and proceeded to kindle it with the sacred relic so carefully preserved. Both were dry, and soon began to crackle and sparkle, and shed a ruddy light over first the bright brass fire-irons and fender, thence, as the flickering flames began to leap and spread, the ruddy glow expanded, and touched lightly the rows of brass nails which outlined the seats of chairs and sofa, the shining leather and mahogany, the crimson carpet and

curtains, the church windows of the bookcase and convex mirror, which returned the light with interest, and cast pleasant reflections all around.

Joseph and his Brethren, in their new coats of glossy varnish, shone in the light of that blazing Christmas log, with a new meaning and a new story. There was no Christmas for Pharaoh, and his Egyptians ; and if it beamed on the dim eyes of Jacob, or on Joseph and his penitent Brethren, it was looming in the shadowy future, and seen with the light of prophecy ; but that Christmas log lighting up the wooden memorials of dead patriarchs, was itself a memorial of a nearer past, of a son born to another Joseph, to give light, and hope, and life to the world.

Peggy saw or thought nothing of this, as she carried in the tea-board laden with its tiny set of porcelain ; nor as she came again with the shining copper kettle hissing and steaming, and sputtering a request that tea might be "made" immediately. Nor did Alice as she lit the Christmas candles (long moulds tinted in spiral lines with bright colours) in the tall silver-topped carved mahogany candlesticks on the table, and mounted a chair to light those in the candelabra of the already radiant mirror. She thought only of George Latham, and wondered how he was spending his Christmas-eve without her, and wished for fairy wings to bear her to the Lodge unseen.

But the loud clang of the great knocker plied freely, startled her from her reverie, and caused Peggy to upset the salt-cellar she was placing on the table. Whether Alice's perturbation at the cause of the disaster, or Peggy's at the disaster itself, was greatest is a question. To Alice that knock was the knell of hope; to Peggy, as the cause of her spilling the salt, it was an omen of trouble and sorrow, and all evil things. "Only to think oi should'n spill th' salt on Christmas-eve, o' a' neeghts o' th' year, an' a' through a bang a' th' knocker. Oi'd ha' given annything afore oi'd dun aught so unlucky," deplored she all the way she went down the stairs, with her eyes full of tears, and heart full of grief for the trouble that was sure to come, according to her belief.

The knock which so startled Alice and Peggy was Mr. Heywood's only herald, for the deep snow deadened the tramp of hoofs as of footsteps; and therefore, though she did not hurry, Alice reached the hall almost as soon as her father, who himself opened the door, and greeted his friend warmly with, "Merry Christmas, Robert, my boy, I am glad to see you. Welcome to the old Grange!" accompanying the words with a hearty shake of both hands."

"As merry a Christmas to you and all of us," replied Mr. Heywood, bending low and glancing round at Alice and Mrs. Ford as he spoke. "I am proud to be so welcomed once more under your roof;" then,

his hands released, he turned to the young lady, who shivered, not with the cold, and said, "Miss Ford, Alice, may I hope for such a welcome from you?" as he took her passive hand and raised it tenderly to his lips (lips false in all things but love for her.)

"Her lips, man, her, lips! who kisses hands on Christmas Eve?" exclaimed Michael, with the glee of a mischievous schoolboy; and Mr. Heywood, nothing loath, but with a deprecating glance at Alice, which said plainly as words, "Pardon me, how can I help it?" caught the struggling maiden in his strong arms, and kissed her, not coldly, but as his heart prompted, and her father warranted.

As he released her reluctantly, with a lingering look of love, she darted angrily from him, and, without a word of either welcome or rebuke, took refuge in her little room, near which they stood, and closed the door, locking it within. Mr. Heywood seemed somewhat discomposed at her disappearance, but remembering Mrs. Ford, who stood calmly by awaiting recognition, he stepped forward with a pleasant salutation, while Michael laughed heartily, and exclaimed cheerily, "Never mind, Robert, it's all right; she'll come round; all girls are alike, run away from the first kiss, but are ready enough for the second. Here, Dick, what a while you've been; take this horse round to the stable, see him well rubbed down, and give him a warm mash."

Dick grinned, scraped back his right foot, and made a sort of duck with his head in acknowledgment of Mr. Heywood's presence.

"A merry Christmas to you, Dick," was Mr. Heywood's pleasant greeting of the countryman; "I hope your friend, Peggy, is well, and still kind to you."

"Same to yo, Mester Yawood, an' manny on 'em. Ay, Peggy's a' reeght, sur, an' koind eneugh; but she be moightly cast down just naw, an' a' for upsetting th' saut. She do be sorely suppositious; but the wench is a' reeght, thenk yo, sur;" so saying, with a second grin, and a repetition of the plunge and scrape, doing duty as a bow, proud and pleased by the notice of the trim gentleman, Dick took the horse by the reins and led him away towards his stable, first, however, lifting the saddle-bags into the hall. A servant was summoned from the kitchen to carry these to Mr. Heywood's room; and Mr. Ford, taking the younger man's arm, led him away up the staircase. After a few orders to the disconsolate Peggy, Mrs. Ford followed, and herself lighted her guest to his chamber, for she would have thought it a breach of hospitality to depute that office to a domestic.

On her return to the drawing-room she found Michael seated by the hearth, looking thoughtfully into the fire, with his right arm resting on the table, hammering the tips of his compressed fingers on the tea-board, which she knew of old to be a sign of growing

impatience. She stirred about the room, infused the tea, arranged the table as Peggy brought in the edibles, trimmed the candles, and was proceeding to place the chairs, when his irritability found vent in the explosive inquiry, "Why, has that girl not come up-stairs yet? by jingo, if she doesn't come soon, I'll make her. She had better let me see no more of her nonsensical airs. A fine thing, indeed, if a girl's sweetheart may not have a kiss after riding so many miles over the snow to see her. Christmas time, too. You never refused me one, Margaret, when I came a-wooing; did'st thou, old woman?" and he drew her within his arm, and pressed her placid lips to his, softening at the remembrance of his own courtship. "There was no running away from me when I stopped at the Manor House, was there, Margaret? Yet I never travelled half so far for a smile or a kiss."

"Well, but, Michael," remarked she, timidly, "You know that was different. I was always very fond of you (there was a tighter squeeze of his arm), and Alice is not fond of Mr. Heywood.

The arm relaxed, the hand clenched, and down it came on the table with a force that caused his wife to start and the China-ware to rattle.

"Different, is it? then, by jingo, it is quite time there was a change. Not fond of him! Then the sooner she becomes fond of him the better. She may dismiss that Latham from her thoughts, for marry

him she shall *not*, and there's an end to that ;" and Michael concluded with the deliberate tone of one whose "right there was none to dispute," whose fiat was inevitable fate.

"I'll go and see what is keeping Alice ; perhaps, after all, she is busy helping the maids in the kitchen, they'll be lighting the yule-log by this time ;" and Margaret, as she spoke, glided from the room, pleased to escape, and anxious to prevent the breach between Alice and her father from widening.

Poor peace-loving Margaret ! she found a greater commotion in the kitchen than the irritability she left behind in the drawing-room. Peggy, with her apron over her head, sat sobbing on the settle ; Sally, her sharp-tempered auxiliary, was plying her tongue very actively ; Betty, as noisily, strove to restore quiet ; while Dick, sitting beside Peggy, alternately soothed, and provoked by his laughter, the tears he sought to repress. For some time Mrs. Ford could obtain no information as to the cause of disquiet, all speaking at once ; at length Dick tendered his explanation, interrupted by the risibility he could not restrain :

"Whoi, mistress, Sally wur leeghtin' th' yule-log, and th' wood bein' reather green, it didna' leeght koindly ; so th' wench tuk th' bellowses to blow th' kindlin' up, and when hoo'd dun, clapped the bellowses on th' table loike ; and our Peggy, with her dorn'd silly supposition, jumps up an' maks a row wi' th'

wench about it! Tha' silly thing!" added he, turning to Peggy, who, from behind her veiling apron, sobbed out :

" Oi o-o-only said there wur sure to b-be a s-storm i'th' house, if th' bellowses lay on th' t-t-table, and oi'd dun mischief enough i'th' house, f-f-fur one neeight in upsettin' th' saut-sellar to bring trouble in ; an' she need na' mak' it worse, and then she up an' flew at me wi' a tongue like a town bell."

" Who's getten' a tongue like a town bell ?" asked vituperative Sally, with the face of a scold, and her head thrust forward. " Moi tongue's as civil as yourn, an' oi'm na' goin' to be flyted for nought but puttin' th' bellowses out o' moi hond. Oi didna' hoire (hire) to be at th' beck an' call on a' thoi queer fancies, dunna thee think it."

" Naw, Sally, thee be quoiet ; 'twas on'ny last week yo' grumbled at th' bellowses bein' on th' table, and blowed me up for't," interposed Betty, who did not care to see her old friend Peggy unjustly assailed by a new comer, to say nothing of a leaning towards similar prejudices.

" Oi'm sartin s-sure, m-mistress, oi never meant anny harm, an' oi never meant to mak' this row on blessed Christmas-eve ; but even Dick wur agen me, an' said as how oi wur a fuile. An' oi couldno' stand it, an' I wur loike to croy !"

" I am very sorry to find the quiet of the house-

hold destroyed for such a trifle," said Mrs. Ford, regretfully.

"Trifle, indeed!" muttered Sally, with an indignant toss of the head.

"Very sorry," continued Mrs. Ford, regardless of Sally's interjection, "that Christmas-eve, of all nights in the year, should witness a squabble like this; I will not call it a quarrel. I own that Peggy is inclined to be superstitious; but if the truth were known, Sally, I dare say you are just as foolish; and, Sally, it may be well to tell you that I have been used to good temper in my kitchen, and expect it. Betty and Peggy have lived comfortably together for many years; I hope you will not be the cause of disagreements. As for you, Dick, I am very cross with you. It is no proof of your good sense to laugh at Peggy's folly, or encourage a dispute about nothing. However, I hope you will make your peace with her before long. But I came to look for Alice; do any of you know where she is?"

No one knew; so, leaving the abashed domestics to settle their differences at leisure, she returned to the hall, and tapped lightly at Alice's sitting-room door.

There were traces of tears on the face of the daughter, as she opened the door to admit her mother, and an indignant flush still burned on cheeks and forehead. For some time she steadily refused to return to the drawing-room; but moved by her mother's

distress lest her refusal should further irritate her father, and provoke another angry scene on Christmas-eve, she listened to the dictates of reason, and followed her mother up-stairs. For the “peace of the family,” which Mrs. Ford was so apprehensive of disturbing (she herself being, at all times, willing to make any concession to “peace and quietness”), Alice at length consented to take her place at the tea-table, conscious that any extreme display of resentment would only rouse her father’s ire, and equally sensible that open opposition was the very worst way to incline him to abandon his will so as to suit her wishes. There were ways and means to keep Mr. Heywood at a distance, if he were a gentleman, and yet preserve her own dignity without offending her father—at least she hoped so.

When they reached the drawing-room, Mr. Heywood was already there, with no signs of his journey in his elegant attire. His boots had been exchanged for shoes, high-heeled and paste-buckled, his silk stockings were adorned with elaborate crimson clocks, the mulberry-coloured coat had a profuse trimming of silk lace, buttons and frogs: the pea-green satin vest and smalls were faultless in fit and fashion, ruffles and cravat were edged with costly Mechlin lace; chains and bunches of seals bespoke a watch in each fob; the powdered periwig was fresh from the barber’s block, an atmosphere of perfuming essences sur-

rounded him, and the fine feathers made a very fine bird indeed.

He advanced to meet Alice with an apology for his presumptuous salutation, disclaiming all intentions to annoy or offend, and begging earnestly to be reinstated in her good opinion, seconding his appeal with a look of such humble entreaty in those inscrutable eyes, it was impossible to be obdurate. Observant of her father's stern scrutiny, she accepted his apology with as good a grace as she could assume : and, taking the seat he offered, proceeded to dispense the tea, whilst he, restored to good-humour by her affability, presided over the solids with his accustomed genial hospitality. And Mrs. Ford, once more at ease, sipped her tea, ate cake and corned beef ; and, quietly watchful of others, especially Mr. Heywood, supplied and anticipated wants with unobtrusive tact.

Mr. Ford was in high spirits : the blazing yule-log, crackling and sparkling on the hearth, warmed and brightened up the warm colours and bright fittings of the room ; but, beyond that, the happy and thankful faces he had met and caused during the day, had brightened up his secret heart, and the brilliant presence of Mr. Heywood by the side of Alice was the cap-sheaf of his delight.

That gentleman exerted himself to dissipate from the mind of Alice any ill impression lingering there, mingling a degree of delicate respect with his profuse

attentions, which at least disarmed her displeasure. His impenetrable grey eyes followed her every movement with varying expressions ; but, so guarded, it was impossible to construe or resent any of his glances as offensive. But he called her “ Alice,” with a tender cadence on the word, and a sensitive nerve jarred every time he addressed her. What right had he to call her Alice ? Her heart answered her heart, “ The right of a father’s sanction,” and the echo smote her painfully.

Conversation was brisk, at least between the gentlemen. Mrs. Ford, seldom much more than a listener, only put in a few mild words now and then, and Alice, wandering away in thought to Latham Lodge, was only recalled home by an occasional direct question. The ordinary topics of weather, journey, state of roads and state of trade were soon exhausted, and then Mr. Ford asked his visitor what he thought of his new residence, and if he did not consider it a disgrace that so fine an old mansion should have been left to the bats and owls.

“ So far as I could judge, riding up in the dusk, it appears a noble building, with a good frontage, but you must permit me to defer my opinion until daylight enables me to form one. Alice will then, Mr. Ford, most probably accord me the grace she did at Ford-brook, and be our companion and my guide in a tour of the Grange,” was the bland reply, “ and,”

added Mr. Heywood, turning his handsome face towards her, with a pleading look in his sphynx-like eyes, "May, I, dear Alice, hope for that happiness?"

An almost imperceptible shudder at the "dear" with which he prefaced the Alice, an inclination of her head, and the coldly uttered words, "If it is my father's wish," was the sole response of the reluctant maiden.

"Of course, it is my wish, you know that, Alice; we shall have plenty of time after breakfast. By the by, Margaret, what time do you expect your friends from Chester?"

A sudden change passed over the face of Mr. Heywood as Mr. Ford put this casual question to his wife, a mingling of uneasiness or pain with an angry scowl, which drew his close eyebrows closer till they met, but ere Mrs. Ford had finished her brief reply it was gone, not however before it caught the observant eye of Alice, who musingly wondered where she had seen that disagreeable expression before.

Even Mr. Ford's duller sight had been attracted to it, and he inquired anxiously, "What is the matter, Robert? are you ill?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing—a sudden spasm, that was all; I am subject to them, and have been for years. Pray do not regard them."

"Why, I declare, Robert, you are just like old Mr. Peover" (another "spasm"), "he has sudden attacks

of illness, but they don't end with a mere spasm. We were looking at a boat on the Dee the morning we made our survey of this place, and the poor fellow almost fell over into the river ; and he had a second attack in this room. I was quite sorry for the eccentric old gentleman. I should like you to see him, Robert, he is a singular individual, abrupt and plain-spoken, but as simple and single-minded as a child."

"Indeed, if that be the case he would be worth knowing. I may have the pleasure of his acquaintance some day perhaps," observed Mr. Heywood, lightly.

"Well, Michael did ask him and Mrs. Peover to spend Christmas here, but the dear old gentleman is laid up with rheumatism, I grieve to say, so we cannot hope for their company," remarked Mrs. Ford, kindly.

"I am sorry to lose the opportunity of an introduction to your curious friend," replied Mr. Heywood, very complacently, but with a very strong glitter in his unsearchable eyes.

"Ailsie, love," said her father (he always called her Ailsie when in a specially good humour), "sing us a carol or two, and then we will go down-stairs to see what is going on in the kitchen, and join in the fun, if Mr. Heywood is agreeable."

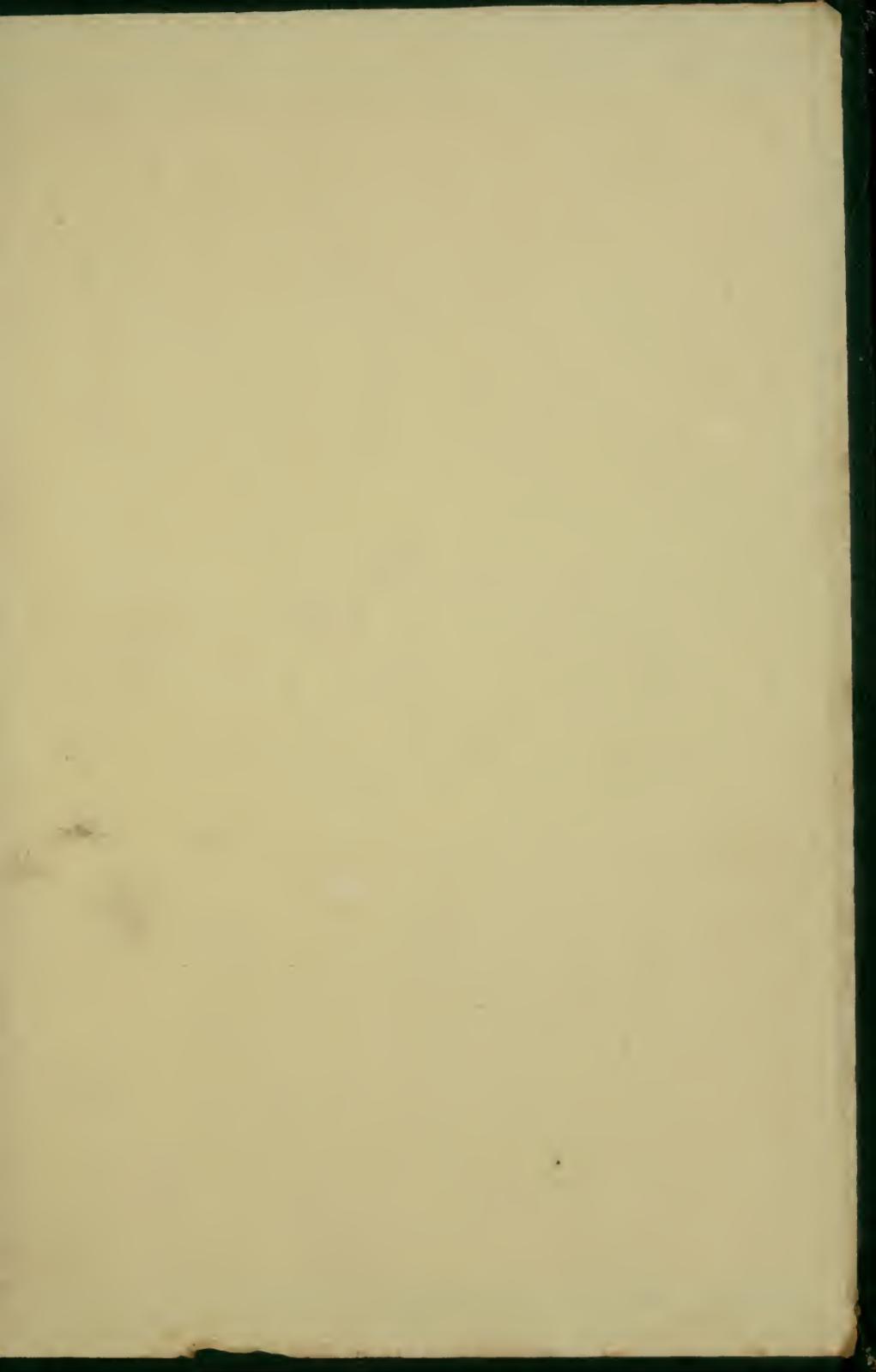
Mr. Heywood of course would be delighted, and

Alice, pleased to see the smile restored to her father's face, to oblige him sat down to the harpsichord to play and sing all the Christmas carols in her collection, Mr. Heywood standing by her side, and gracefully turning over her music the while, the jewels on his slender fingers glittering like his eyes. But she cared not for his fingers or his rings, she thought only of the dear hand that had turned the leaves for her when she sang "Auld Robin Gray," in that room so recently; and as the sacred melodies she warbled floated sweetly on the ear, holy thoughts and genial wishes wafted on wings of love to another household than her own.

But Robert Heywood was an enraptured listener, and when she concluded thanked her gratefully (as though she had sung for him) in choice and elegant words, which, however, she scarcely heard. Then, offering his hand, he led her from the room, down the staircase and along the lower corridor, followed by his host and hostess, and as they went whispered Christmas hopes and loving entreaties into a dull and indifferent ear.







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